

cinnamon and swirl

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by [offday](#)

Summary

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“Why didn’t you?” Sapnap asks as he swipes the back of his hand over his nose. “I mean, not even George?”

The mention of their other friend brings Dream into a new reality. Soft, brown, messy hair on his screen, a grin that laughs and cheeks that turn rosy any time Dream teases him. A light squeal into his headset at the late hours of the night, once Dream is alone in his tranquility. *George*, the rough paper that sands Dream down. Warm, fluffy bread. *Fuck*, Dream thinks.

Dream decides to tell his friends about his daughter *right* before they move in.

Notes

Do not reupload my work anywhere, or share with cc's.

Hello!!!! I'm writing a kid fic oooohhh

I'm actually so excited for this because it's set in a world where they are both streamers, too, so if anything of this sort makes you uncomfortable, then please do not read!! Stay comfortable reading fiction, my friends.

But please enjoy!! Sorry for any errors!!!!

Translations:

[Chinese](#)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

one

Dream's mother used to joke about how one day he'd grow old with a lover, buy a house near the water, and become so lazy that he'd never work on the maintenance. He'd let the mildew grow, allow the humidity to pour through the cracks in the window, watch his bill go up and up until he was knocking on his parents' door, politely asking for help on how to remove the residue.

He was stubborn back then, *sure*, with whatever adolescent attitude and free-spirited wish to be rebellious soared through him. But at some point he tightened his hands on a lawn mower and helped his father outside, washed the dishes when his mother had left for the day.

He'd spend hours dusting, accidentally breaking a frame or two, trying to get around the tops of the metal racks in his home, just to get a pat on the back and a grin from his parents.

Dream grew up with a good grip on his shoulders and constructive arms around his belly every time he felt himself slip.

And as Dream got older, he stayed close to his family. He'd stream, he'd treat them to what they deserved, what they had wanted to have. But every day, they'd joke about it—growing old with that lover, *that house near the water*.

But absolutely no one in Dream's life had expected *this*.

Tiny, wet hands that cling to his legs as he turns up the volume in his headset. A babble, a giggle, strands of hair that press to his knee as Dream looks up at Sapnap's icon on his computer screen.

"I mean," Sapnap says, voice low. "*A fuckin' daughter, man?*"

Dream takes a deep breath, holds it at the bottom of his lungs until he finds the energy to let it out, softly and cautiously from his nostrils.

His fingertips fade over the top of his daughter's hair, disappearing near her ears. She looks up, flutters her eyes shut like she knows there is distress somewhere far beyond the front that Dream gives her.

He frowns at her.

"Yeah," Dream clicks his tongue. "A daughter, Sap."

Her eyes brighten. And when they do, Dream feels the innermost part of his chest lift. He's exhausted. It's raining. He has spent the past ten hours ignoring Sapnap with his entire being, hoping that he hadn't heard the mutters of his mother when she had stumbled into his house last night with an apologetic voice and worry laced throughout her.

She had asked, *god*, she really asked him if he was going to be busy last night. And Dream told her the truth—that his schedule was free. No recording. No streams. Just him, an empty bed, and the heat of a well-deserved shower.

Which is why she had originally laid a kiss on Dream's head, promised him she'd take the young girl for the night, and leave Dream with the quietness of his own home.

But when sleep hadn't called him, when Dream hadn't dared to slip under his covers—a mix of missing his daughter for the night and already having a fucked up sleep schedule, *he called*

Sapnap. And for hours, they talked. They had talked about nonsense, about space, science, about the fact that Sapnap was looking back into online classes for when he officially moved in with Dream.

Dream had felt so lazy in his chair that he even thought about telling him about his kid—the one thing he hadn't done for years, now.

His muscles had relaxed. He lazed further into the leather that he never saw his mother's texts. Not one.

And he regrets it now as he thinks about it—how it could've been an emergency, how his daughter could've been hurt while he was sitting somewhere, laughing about nonsense, swearing and chuckling and being a fool. *Fuck*.

He had noticed the ring of the front door first, quick and loud. And once he had, he turned his phone over to reveal the front door alerts, along with the other text messages.

Sweetheart, I got called into work.. I need to bring E by. Is that okay? She had first written, followed by another ten minutes later, *Clay. Are you asleep? Your sister is out. I already asked if she could watch her.*

I'm on my way. Gonna have to wake you. Sorry, love.

Dream remembers the way his heart had sunk at the familiarity in her messages, the sweet, caring tone she had given him every time he needed her advice. He remembers brushing his thumb over the missed calls. His stomach had sunk.

Dream knew he had been too stunned to hit mute on his mic, too shocked at the revelation of his mother's arrival. The way she had pushed on the door once she had heard silence, once she stepped through with the words, *"I'm so sorry, but I need to drop her off, I've got work, dear."*

Even his daughter's active voice, excitement and warm eyes at the late hour as she saw her father, her voice already muttering out for her father.

And Sapnap, sitting quietly and curiously, had heard *everything*.

Dream hadn't slept the entire night after he had hung up, shooting Sapnap an, **I will explain later**, text. Instead, his eyes bore into the paint of the wall, glancing from his bed—where his daughter had slept—back to his computer screen, where Sapnap's icon rested offline.

For hours, Dream thought about calling him again, pouring his heart out, *explaining*. But none of his words could even get to the tip of his tongue. And therefore, he let it rest.

Until now, when Sapnap's busy mouth asks question after question.

Dream listens, of course.

It's his decency to, and he's spent so long holding this back from Sapnap that he wants to talk to him. There's just a part of him that wishes Sapnap could already *get it*—from the painful eating of guilt to the crumbling anxiousness, all the way to the trembling sadness revolving around the situation. He wishes Sapnap could know why he's hid this from him.

But he doesn't. And that leaves Dream here, holding small fingers in the palm of his hands as he rolls back and forth in his chair.

On his desk are papers of different sizes, some of them in wooden frames, some laminated. They're drawings that his daughter has perfected, blues and yellows and reds, her favorite colors, all mashed together. Dream keeps every single thing she makes. He understands her need to create. She must have that desire to do something, even if it's pressing too hard with crayons on paper and poking holes and proceeding to get wax on the couch. He keeps it all.

She keeps busy now, murmuring to herself as Dream talks to Sapnap. She stands by Dream's legs, crayons in her hands as she tries not to bump her head against the desk. Dream watches her thoughtfully, dips his fingers underneath the desk when she goes from the ground and then up.

"Does she," Sapnap clears his throat. "Does she look like you?"

Dream has this heat that grows at the bottom of his spine. He looks down, feels digging into his calf. He grins.

"Yeah, yeah," he mutters before he looks up at his webcam, closed off, like it's quietly watching him despite being covered. "Do you wanna video call?"

If Dream sounds forceful, he doesn't know. If Sapnap is not taking this well, he doesn't know. But he knows he is trying, stepping forward onto these hot stones that are hardly enough to get the two of them on the right track again.

"I'd love to," Sapnap whispers.

Dream can hear the way he sits up further in his chair.

He must be running his fingers over the front part of his desk, scraping crumbs off. He's cleaning up. Dream chuckles when Sapnap swears through his mic. He apologizes, but Dream fills him in with a, "she's not wearing the headset, Sap."

Dream doesn't give a thought to the way he's dressed. He only lifts his daughter onto his lap and switches his camera on the moment he finds Sapnap smiling softly at him through the warm tones of his room.

"Hey," Dream whispers as his camera loads. "One sec."

"Take your time."

He sounds nervous. And Dream's fingers shake as he pulls on the front part of his daughter's shirt, fixes at her messy hair and the drool dribbling at her chin. Dream knows it's at his knee as well, but he doesn't wipe it off.

They've had such a lazy day, so it's expected for the both of them to look like they haven't left bed. Sapnap will understand.

"Here, sweetheart." Dream notices the camera turning on, but he doesn't look up. He pulls the collar of his own shirt to wipe her face a little smoother. "Jesus, E. What is this?"

"Cookie," she tries to tell him, but winces and pushes his hand away when Dream tries to wipe her face.

Dream is stalling now. He's too shy to look up, too scared. Part of him wants to pretend his camera is broken, but he knows it's on, it's working, because Sapnap is here, and he's looking at the two of them.

“Sorry,” he chuckles, “she was eating like, chocolate, or something.”

As his face tilts up, and as his eyes meet the screen again, Dream swallows hard. Sapnap is his best friend. Dream has spent hours staring at his face, but somehow, after all of his time, he looks much more intriguing. Dream looks from his eyebrows to his nose to his mouth, searching for any sort of twitch, any raise of emotion. And already, his gut turns as he imagines what Sapnap will say.

Dream’s hands rest on his daughter’s belly as he turns her fully, his chin soon sitting just on the top of her head. She gives a frustrated grin. Dream copies her.

“Holy shit, Dream,” Sapnap whispers. “I just got like—I got butterflies in my stomach just from seeing the two of you.”

God. He can’t help it.

Dream chokes on a sob.

His face hides in the warmth of his child’s shoulder and he tries to hold his tears back, but he hardly even registers that Sapnap is crying, too.

There’s a glossiness in his friend’s eyes, and a rush of sadness goes plunging through Dream. He feels trapped in his emotions, the cough in his throat coiling around inside of him. It’s buried so deep, all the pain and worry and regret, but Sapnap looks at him like he wants Dream to let it out already, and Dream can’t help but tremble in his seat.

His lip curls down.

“Kills me,” Sapnap snuffles, voice on empty and running low, “to just know you did this all alone.”

The sounds that echo back through his headset are too weak for his heart. He thinks of the first four months after his daughter was born—how miserable he was every time he’d log onto Sapnap’s streams, onto George’s. How he’d sit in the calls with tear stains down his cheeks and with an unfamiliar burn down the center of his chest.

He ponders momentarily about how tired he’d be, half asleep but still restless to be involved with his friends. Or how he’d cry with a muted mic when he thinks about his frustrated fights with his mother—or even his sister when she’d tell him to get rest, and when he’d disobey, when he’d use his free time to work.

Then there were the oblivious features of his friends, who made joke after joke in their streams, in their calls. Alone, away from fans, they’d talk about life, future, and every time, Dream would bite his lip, wishing he could break his tension and just,

Tell them, tell them, tell them, he’d cry to himself. But month after month would pass and Dream would bare his teeth, sink his claws into the air, and still have nothing to grip but the loneliness of time.

“I could’ve,” Dream admits. “So many times.”

Sapnap stays quiet a moment, and while Dream snuffles, the little girl in his lap turns, taps against his face like the tears are common. Dream kisses at her hand, promises her he is okay.

He acts like nothing is wrong. Like Sapnap isn’t crying in front of him when he should scold Dream, when Dream should accept his harsh words for keeping such a serious thing from him.

“Why didn’t you?” Sapnap asks as he swipes the back of his hand over his nose. “I mean, not even George?”

The mention of their other friend brings Dream into a new reality. Soft, brown, messy hair on his screen, a grin that laughs and cheeks that turn rosy any time Dream teases him. A light squeal into his headset at the late hours of the night, once Dream is alone in his tranquility. George, the rough paper that sands Dream down. Warm, fluffy bread. Fuck, Dream thinks. George.

“No.” Dream has a hard time spitting out the word. “And I—”

He stops himself.

What? Does he think George is just never going to find out?

Sapnap’s low chuckle is more sarcastic than Dream thinks he meant it to come off.

“You don’t want him to find out, or what?” Sapnap asks. “You don’t think George is into dads?”

Dream wants to swear at him. Some aching swirl in the pit of his stomach wants to reach into his screen and grab Sapnap by the collar to tell him to mind his business, or to watch his mouth. But Sapnap is joking. They’ve always messed around like this.

“Funny.” Dream dares to let the word tumble past his lips.

Sapnap doesn’t catch on to his struggle. He only looks back at the screen and sighs.

The air shifts, and Dream scoots further up in his chair as he inhales a deep breath. It’s quiet, and for that, Dream is thankful. Peace is ease in such a tense moment, but even like this, Dream can’t take these seconds for himself. He squeezes his daughter’s finger softly when she wraps her hand around his pointer.

“So many reasons, Sapnap,” Dream starts.

Start talking then, Dream is sure Sapnap wants to snap.

But he doesn’t. He sits back and plays with the strings of his pants, so mindlessly, as though he’s ready to listen.

And Dream says it all. He tells Sapnap about privacy issues, his fears of being exposed, of his daughter’s identity being poured online like some simple joke. Fans, friends, people taking her for their own. Businesses, podcasts, interviews, all sorts of companies—all of them ready with vicious, open arms about how one of the most popular Minecraft streamers has a kid on the other side of his computer.

Then—*then*, there was the view of whatever supposed relationship he could be in. His daughter’s mother. People eating that up like fucking dessert. Dream swallows his nervousness when he gets on the topic, but Sapnap says nothing. He only listens.

And when he bites on the end of his lip, when he feels as though still his words aren’t enough to explain why he couldn’t have told his best friends, Dream shrugs.

“Dunno, Sap,” Dream whimpers softly. “I’m so sorry.”

After a couple of moments to himself, Sapnap brings his face to the camera.

“You never told me her name.”

Dream can see the flicker of warmth that Sapnap tries to share through the screen. He's got this tinge of a smile, just creeping up the longer he sits there, alone and waiting for Dream to reply.

But Dream can only mess with the edge of his pants. He can only bite on the tip of his tongue as he stares at the brunette hair in front of him. He chuckles, runs his fingers over the small forehead until all of it comes back.

"You're going to laugh, dude," Dream says right off the bat.

"Laugh?" Sapnap—well, he laughs. But he stops himself and then takes a breath. "Oh god, Dream. What did you do?"

The way Dream holds a little girl on his lap, bumping her up every couple of seconds with his knee, is gentle. Sapnap watches with deep-set eyes of curiosity, cocks his head to the left as he looks back and forth.

Dream takes a deep breath and then licks at his lips, and for whatever reason, the air doesn't taste as burnt anymore. It comes into his body a lot smoother, much gentler.

"I named her after something in Minecraft," Dream admits.

Sapnap doesn't laugh. He raises his brow.

"After a block?"

"No." Dream forces out a laugh. "I, uh—no. I really love her name, so I hope you do too."

He lifts the little girl's right hand up, pushes his pointer finger into her palm, and snickers at the way she immediately closes around his finger. He uses both of their hands to wave at Sapnap.

"Tell me, motherfucker."

"Not with that mouth."

Sapnap slides down in his chair. "She can't hear me!"

The smile melts onto Dream's face, and he drowns in the easy fire of warmth for a moment, just looking between Sapnap and his own camera on the screen. His head shakes from side to side as he disapproves of the words from his friend's mouth.

"This is Elytra," he says confidently, then whispers down to her ear. "Say hi to Sapnap."

She grins and swings her hand, repeating the word "hello," every time that Dream squeezes at her side.

Again, Sapnap says nothing.

Dream waits, feels that force against his chest. He swallows thick worry, feels it scrape against the walls in his throat. But he doesn't know why. Maybe because this is Sapnap he's talking to, maybe because this feels like he's walking through some sort of approval like how it went with his mother, when he brought up the idea with his sister—who only grinned wider than Dream had ever seen her smile before.

"That's. Dream, that suits your little family," Sapnap smiles, turns his cheeks into a rosy, pleasant tone of red.

Dream wants to giggle.

“*Elytra*,” Sapnap repeats. “Hi Elytra. Hello, uh, Elytra. E—”

“Okay, Sap, okay,” Dream laughs this time, genuine and kind from the deepest part of his belly.

Dream rubs his nose against his shoulder. He’s shy now, turning the same embarrassing shade of red that Sapnap is just on the opposite side of the screen.

When it’s Sapnap’s turn to become shy again, Dream just watches. He thinks about where he’s at, how he’s gotten here, and what sort of steps are forward. There’s so many, some of them worse than the others, but Dream wants to lie in bliss for now.

His desk is all sticky, and he wants to clean it, but there’s a little too much on his mind. So instead, he sighs out a rough, low grunt, and looks at Sapnap with a soft shrug.

“I want to come sooner,” Sapnap tells him.

Dream doesn’t stand up to deny him. He doesn’t roll his shoulders forward to tell him no. Sapnap doesn’t deserve that—and Dream doesn’t *want* that. Dream wants him here sooner. But with Elytra on his lap, with a sudden humidity in the air, Dream already feels like he *is* here.

But whether he likes it or not, Dream is scared.

Scared of the world disagreeing with his friends moving in, with Sapnap coming earlier than he should be coming.

All Dream can give him is a smile, something as genuine as he gives him when it’s just the two of them, like he does on their late night calls. Because hidden behind it is his intensifying panic. Behind the tautness of his lips and the bone of his teeth is the word, *George*.

The world around them is all easy.

The weather is sweet, not hot to a blaze where it makes sweat drip down Dream’s back. Not like the incoming months of summer when Dream worried about whether Elytra would get too hot and grow a sunburn when they brought her to the beach for the first time. There’s a breeze, despite the humidity as they shift into early May. And Dream doesn’t have an excuse for his cloudy thoughts.

But Sapnap sees right through him.

Even when Dream agrees with him, tells him to come sooner, says yes and yes and yes, Sapnap knows Dream is thinking beyond that. About how George will wonder why he’s moving sooner than he should be.

The two of them talk for another hour. And when Elytra falls asleep against Dream’s shoulder, drools onto the skin of his neck, Sapnap chuckles.

“I’m afraid he’ll hate me,” Dream whispers. “I’m terrified.”

The sincerity in Sapnap’s eyes is enough to draw a pathetic and unspoken whimper from Dream’s lips.

“You had a kid, Clay,” Sapnap says. “You didn’t grow another seven arms.”

“I’m thinking that might be less scary.”

Sapnap's smile is playful, and his head shakes from left to right as his eyes flutter to a close.

"George loves you," he whispers, and when his voice drops even lower, Dream thinks he might die. "You know that."

Love.

Dream's palm flattens over his daughter's back. She lies still against him, as always. Dream is grateful for how good of a sleeper she is, always tucking so tightly into his side, against his chest, only waking at certain times to poke her fingers into his hair, to rest her hands on his belly. He does the same—turns to find her, nuzzles in close, pulls her to a more comfortable position, lifts the blanket up to reassure that she is warm.

And he'll just watch. He'll let his careful eyes drift shut in soft blinks as the backs of his knuckles touch over her skin—and he'll think.

Sometimes, he wonders if Sapnap will do the same, *if George will.*

The thought makes his stomach turn. He doesn't know whether the feeling in his stomach makes him feel failed, to know that he terrified for his friends to show up, to all sit close to him, to look at him with these eyes of wonder, to look at him like he's some crumpling wound trying to heal, holding a soft-boned child in his hands.

Elytra keeps him strong. For that, Dream is thankful.

"I know," Dream nods.

"Go to bed," Sapnap says. "You need rest. Talk to him when you're ready."

Dream looks up toward him, helplessly. Sapnap is a sudden light through the darkness in his room. He smirks at Dream, sprouts a wild look in his eyes and then licks his lips.

"Let us in, Dream," he says. "You've done so much by letting us move into your home, so let us into this part of your family. We'll be honored, so *fucking honored* to be there with the two of you. I promise."

Later that night, when Dream bathes Elytra somewhere around three in the morning, he cries again.

He lets his tears fall in a sloppy way, wet and far from graceful, dripping down his cheeks as he surrenders to his emotions that he's been holding back. The faucet in the bathtub runs, hits the warm water underneath his hands, against Elytra's body in a way that shows sadness. She knows, as she always has, the emotions that rain from her father. And Dream wishes that maybe sometimes she wouldn't know him this well, that they weren't the same blood, that she didn't have to see him weep in the humid bathroom under the light of what three in the morning looks like.

"You'll love Sapnap." Dream brings his nose down to Elytra's. "And George. You'll love 'em. You will."

His fingertips lather shampoo into her hair, soft and steady as he hums to her. She hardly pays attention, most of her focus on the colorful cups that she fills with water, that she dunks underneath to stare at.

Dream hates thinking back to her first year, when he was getting good at all of this, when his hands felt like bricks every time he touched her skin, when he feared that every cough meant something worse, when he'd slip away from his bedroom to call his mom with a sharp, spiraling, desperate

voice. But every time she was there.

Things make sense now, he thinks as he wraps her in a towel.

"Uh oh," Dream makes a face at her, "we forgot pants."

"Uh oh," she says back to him.

He's tired.

Fuck, he's so goddamn tired after today. And he knows that a nap would have been ideal between hanging up with Sapnap and between Elytra's random waking in the middle of the night. But he didn't sleep, and now his eyelids are heavy, and the younger one in front of him is growing sleepy, and all Dream wants to do is lie down with her and feel the night close in on him. He wants to think about how he's going to tell George and how that is going to feel, how the threat and the tightness in his throat will squeeze at him.

Maybe if he thinks hard enough, he can prepare for it.

Elytra makes a sound with her mouth, and when Dream looks up, he gets that familiar sense of worry. She coughs, and then groans, kicks her feet out a couple times out on the counter. Then she looks up at Dream and laughs.

"Pants," she says.

He nods his head in solidarity.

"Pants."

They always repeat to each other like this.

Dream craves a deep sleep that night, but as far as he remembers, he doesn't rest but for thirty minutes, especially when he can't get the thought of George out of his mind. Sleep is afraid of him—as it is almost every night.

When Dream closes his eyes, all he sees is George.



Truthfully, Dream has never really been scared.

He's had bundled up tension before performances back in middle school, has been worried over stupid things like fights with his family. He's felt the panic up in his lungs over stuff with Elytra, but all of that would fade out only moments after it had started.

Relief always feels good.

But as he sits on the edge of his bed, as his phone sweats in the palm of his hand, Dream comes to realize that he's never felt such immobility from fear.

George said he would be available to talk almost twenty minutes ago, but then sent a text telling Dream he needed to shower right before.

Dream shrugged it off, assured him it was fine. To George, this was a simple call. But to Dream, he had already been walking on glass shards for hours, swallowing them down before his mouth was even open.

Even on a good day, Dream would call this stinging in his heart dreadful. His lungs were on fire, and all he could picture was George's newly wet hair, his overly fitted sweatshirt and his weak smile turning foul, his squinted eyes glaring at the wall as Dream tells and tells and tells him this thing he's held back from him.

Betrayal, George would think. *Hatred*.

He doesn't bother with Discord, and for this reason, Dream supposes George knows it's somewhere on the serious side. But if he knows, then Dream hardly understands why he's pushing it off. It's causing his chest to tighten and sizzle and squeeze.

Dream takes a deep breath through his nose when he sends another text.

You almost ready?

It doesn't take but a second for George to type.

i was just getting comfortable; he writes. **i'll call you now?**

A chilly spew of tension curls underneath Dream's chest. He swallows, his throat too dry to fill his silence with a sigh.

Sure.

facetime?

No, no, Dream texts back. **Just audio if it's ok.**

course :)

The same fear that's been sitting underneath Dream's lungs has seized flight and has landed up in his throat. When George's name comes across his phone, Dream's body freezes to a halt. His nostrils are too clear, and when he takes a deeper breath in, his eyes burn. They burn red and give him a hazy vision as he stares at the screen. It rings and rings and Dream's fingers tingle as he accepts the call.

"Hey!" George says, voice dry. He groans as the blankets on his side of the phone shift around, "sorry, I was showering—" he yawns, "—I figured we'd be on here for a while, so I wanted to get that over with first. How are you?"

It's only then when Dream realizes they haven't actually spoken like this for a while now. It's been hardly any texts and catching each other on streams for over a week now.

And now that Dream thinks about it, he's texted George so suddenly with, "can we call, there's something I'd like to talk to you about," and—

"Dream?"

“Yeah?”

George chuckles.

“I asked how you are doing.”

Dream stares at the pattern over his knitted blanket. “Oh.”

The night is getting longer, and Dream is stalling. He is stalling, and George is already worrying and Dream is fucking this entire thing up.

“You okay?” George asks.

There it is.

It’s a pathway, clear and open and ready.

But Dream is so uneasy that the rise and fall of his chest has become too unpatterned, and spit pools under his tongue, slips out on top, encouraging him to swallow, edging him to take a breath, to keep his throat from getting too rough.

“Dream,” George says again, this time lower, softer, but more dangerous. “What is going on?”

He knows.

“I need to talk to you about... something.”

The call moves quieter this time. Much softer breaths, less tension. Dream has finally let it out that what he needs to tell George—that little doubt pestering in his head—is something important.

George says nothing, he hums down the line like he’s already accepted it, like he’s already taken in every ounce of doubt in Dream’s brain. But Dream knows it’s a lie.

“Okay.”

Dream’s fingers curl at his blanket.

He sighs, allowing the breath against his chest to settle his nerves.

If only he could whisper these words, if only George could hear him, see him, take in what he needs to say by just looking at him. Maybe then George would get this a lot easier. His face hardens into something like clay.

He wants George to take in this information, to know that everything he’s saying is real.

If anything, George will be upset with him, and Dream will deal with it, and he accepts that. He knows that. It’s his own fault for driving this far along saying nothing, and now as he lies alone in his bed, with his phone resting against his rib cage, he thinks that time must heal.

And he’ll do whatever it takes to heal with George.

“I, uh,” he takes a breath, “I have a kid, George.”

A sudden, dark stillness goes rushing down the line. Dream can feel every hair stand up on his body like someone has blown air against his neck. But the trees still sway outside his window, the rain still bleeds, and the moonlight still sings. Everything is still normal.

Except for George. He says nothing.

And Dream knows silence. He's so familiar with it, loves it, but this? He can't take this.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

Oh.

George needs time. He needs time, Dream reminds himself.

"Do you need a minute?" Dream dares to ask.

"Do I need a minute?" He snickers. "You're not kidding about this?"

George leaves another laugh at the end of his sentence.

And suddenly, Dream's defences are up. His chest has risen with heat, his nerves turning when the ball of tension drops from his heart to his stomach.

"I'm not joking around when it comes to my family, George," Dream fumes through his teeth.

George pauses for a second.

If Dream could see his face right now, he'd assume that there'd be a crimson, vivacious color painted on George's face. Because as he opens his mouth, Dream swears he's never heard such blood from him.

"Oh, you've got a family now, have you?"

The air in Dream's bedroom goes hot. His mattress becomes too warm, and the sweat forms along the nape of his neck. He shudders when the words repeat past his ears again. George's tone.

Dream wants to forget he ever called him.

These spoken words taste sour.

His defenses are up, but Dream feels too weak.

"Don't ever talk to me like that again," Dream says in a voice barely above a whisper.

George never oversteps like this, but Dream can tell he's mad, too. George's fingers must be splayed over his sheets, gripping hard as he bites on his lip or his tongue to prevent another spray of feverish words.

As Dream hopes, George says nothing in return.

"Okay."

Dream wants to give everything up and go back to yesterday, back to the bath he sat in, back to dinner with his mother and sister and Elytra, when his face had gone all wine from laughing. That was better than whatever the hell this is.

Does he hang up?

Dream doesn't know what to do. He just taps his fingers on his knee and gnaws on his lip. He's

like the walls of an old building in foul weather, wearing down slowly. Is George the rain?

“Are you, uh, in a relationship?” George asks.

“No,” Dream answers immediately. “I haven’t seen her mother since the hospital.”

Hopelessness crowds him. And Dream wonders if he should say something this time.

“You have a girl?” George says softly.

“I do.”

Silence.

“You said you haven’t seen her mother since the day she was born. How...” George pauses a moment. “How long ago was that?”

Dream feels his pulse throbbing at the base of his skull. It’s inched its way around his head, caught onto the edges of his jaw, to finally hold him against his bed. This—this question George is asking, is what’s been coiling up in his belly. And Dream is terrified to answer.

“She’s two, George.”

Dream understands the silence, the deep-rooted reaching that George must be doing. Dream pauses, for just a moment, and stares off at the wall where one of his canvases lies—it’s got the sunset on it, taken from a beautiful place somewhere along a beach. Dream wishes he were there, far from this gut wrenching feeling he has in his body, much further away from the weakening gulps he swallows down.

“Two,” George says, still somewhere between breathing and sighing. “You’ve had a child for two years.”

Dream turns his cheek. He presses skin to his pillowcase, hopes desperately that his feverish feeling will disappear.

“Yeah,” he says aimlessly. “There’s so many reasons I haven’t spoken about this, and even when I told Sapnap, I—”

“Sapnap knows?”

Dream wants to die.

He’s suddenly thrown back against his walls, and the breath goes screaming out of him. There’s so much frustration in this tiny moment, and all Dream wants to do is remind George of who they are, what’s next to come. Because he’s always been like this. He’s always been *positive*, filling trapped moments with light that leads them to success. But this time, Dream has felt the surrounding pressure, and needs the assistance out.

“Yes.” Dream throws a hand up, lets it fall back onto his mattress. “I told him the other night. But only because he overheard my mom. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. I wanted to—”

“Were you just gonna let it slide? Not tell us? Hope it played off as something else?”

Something moves behind Dream’s fingertips. He twitches them twice, lets them hesitate over the end call button. He even clenches his hands into fists as he stares off at that canvas against his wall.

“You’re pissing me off, George.”

“Maybe you should be pissed off,” George says lowly. “How did you expect me to react to this? Good? I don’t even know what to think, Dream. You just threw this on me.”

The tenseness in Dream’s shoulders has already made his neck hurt. It aches, just listening to George talk like it’s Dream’s fault for having this conversation.

Dream doesn’t want to argue. He doesn’t want George to grit his teeth, to bite with his bark, he wants him to listen, to *understand*, to *hear him out*. But this life isn’t meant for that.

Their friendship isn’t as simple as roasting marshmallows on a hot summer evening. They’ve spent years building this, years promising each other to stick like glue, like mud. But Dream has lied to him, has kept something from him, and he wants George to walk into this conversation and say, *“congratulations Dream! I’ll be there soon.”*

He almost whimpers at his own thoughts, almost rolls his eyes at himself. It’s not what he wants, but fuck, if he could have it.

“I know,” Dream says, voice soothing. “I know I brought this to the table so suddenly, George. I know it came out of nowhere and it’s scary. I’m terrified right now. I’m fucking scared to be talking to you. I’m mad, too. But, I don’t want you to think that I was going to... just say nothing.”

George goes silent.

If Dream could see him, he swears that maybe he’d see hope. A chance within George’s eyes. Because he hears a croak, so light as he whispers, “then why haven’t you?”

“George, *please*.”

Dream stops breathing for a minute. Because this is where he gives George his all. This is where he tells him about the deepest, most hidden parts of him, the reasons he and Elytra have been so hidden with their lives for the past two years. But all he can think about is George and his beating heart in a bed across an ocean.

All Dream can think about is the fact that George is supposed to be moving here, with him, with his daughter, and his mouth is running like it’s on fire.

“If you...” Dream begins, starts like he doesn’t want to lose. “If this is going to change your mind about moving here, then please tell me now.”

Dream takes a breath, gazes at the screen that George’s name lights up with. The number increases with the seconds that go by.

“Are you—You know what,” George chuckles low. “Never mind, Dream. Fuck you for thinking that low of me. I can’t do this right now, goodnight.”

Dream watches the room light up when George ends the call. The clock on his phone tells him it’s hardly nine in the evening, but to him, it feels far past four.

That night, Dream falls asleep with the weight of tear stains against his cheeks.

Chapter Notes

thank u all so much for the love this has already received!!!

it's incredible and i honestly feel so honored and genuinely happy... this is a fic i am thrilled to proceed with. lots of angst and tension and love. (so much love)

i hope you enjoy this chapter, please let me know what u think :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

At the edge of Dream's bed stands Sapnap, clad in a dirty white shirt and jeans that are ripped at the thigh.

For whatever god forsaken reason, Dream never really considered the thought of Sapnap ever wearing *jeans*: specifically jeans with rips in them. Besides the few photos he had seen, or the times Sapnap had stood up on camera, he's always pictured him pantless. Or maybe he's imagined sweatpants. Shorts?

But now he's here, with that flourishing smile on his face, and all Dream can do is hook an elbow behind his head to look his friend up and down.

His eyes are still glossy from sleep, still burning from the water he had splashed into them from last night's shower. But as he blinks, as he glares and smirks at Sapnap, he can't help but flush.

"Damn, you look good," Dream tells him.

It's barely seven in the morning, but Sapnap had been driving all night, and his face shows exhaustion. Dream sees it, opens his arms up wide and disregards the fact that Sapnap's filthy clothes—that have traveled across many states—are now being pressed against his sheets. *He'll wash them later.*

He greets his friend, holds him strongly in an embrace and accepts the beat of Sapnap's heart against his chest as they familiarize themselves with each other.

It's so new. Just touching like this, from fingers dancing across each other's bodies to the bones of their knees, harsh against the other. But it's not Dream's first time tucked up in a hug like this.

He and Sapnap have been talking about this for days, weeks, months, years now.

"You smell like the fucking road, dude," Dream scrunches his nose up. "Like, I don't know... car. Like, is this what your car smells like?"

He's teasing him, but Sapnap drops onto the side of the bed and just reads across Dream's features.

"First," he huffs, "fuck you. Second, my car smells like good shit. I just have eight-million boxes in there. Also," Sapnap sits up and stares at Dream's bare chest. "When'd you get this buff? It's kind of sexy."

Laughing, clutching his stomach and drawing up, Dream squints at him.

"Thanks, it's from twenty-three hours of carrying a kid and twenty-two of playing Minecraft."

Sapnap's shoulders hunch forward when he snorts. Dream loves this angle, just lazing back with his arms behind his head as he watches Sapnap's facial expression change. He frowns at Sapnap's still mouth, at the turn of his lips when things go quiet again.

"Welcome, though," Dream finally says. "Who even let you in here?"

Sapnap manages a grin. "Your sister."

It's a surprise to hear of, and Dream finally forces himself to sit further up when Sapnap speaks.

"She let you in? How'd she know?"

"I messaged her, wanted to surprise you."

Dream buckles forward and draws him into a proper hug, pulls him tight against his chest, takes in that recognizable car smell, suffers from the scent of whatever states he has been through.

"So happy you're here," he whispers. "Welcome home."

He speaks the words again, hopelessly wanting them to advance into some intimate spot inside of Sapnap's body. This is home. Dream wants it to feel like home for him.

As Sapnap strokes his hand over Dream's hair, he pats through the knots.

"Need a shower, huh?"

"Look who is talking, you dick."

Dream wonders how quickly they could fall into line like this. Chuckling at each other, dropping onto Dream's sheets like they were talking through a headset. It's so simple with him, he thinks. Just sporting a smile as he narrows his eyes across every inch of him like he never wants to forget.

Still, Dream has this gut-wrenching feeling like things will go bad. Like Sapnap is going to cock his head to the side and snicker at Dream for making mistake after mistake after mistake. He's already woken up late. Dream didn't get to introduce Sapnap to his sister—he's not sure how she got here, how she got home, where she is. Elytra's not even home, and Dream hasn't even showered—having expected Sapnap a little later.

He takes a breath.

"I didn't walk around the house, you know," Sapnap senses his silence and takes care of it.

"What do you mean?"

He stands, looks around the room and touches against Dream's furniture as though he wants to remember it.

"When your sister let me in, I told her to just bring me to your room. I wanted you to do the rest. Show me around, give me the tour, all that stuff. I don't even know if—you know, if..."

He looks nervous, suddenly too uncertain of himself.

Dream smiles. "She's not here. She's with my mom."

The sunlight touches into the room a lot brighter now, and as it does, Dream appears as though he can look at more of Sapnap than he could before. He holds it upon himself to get out of bed, to at least get a shirt on, put deodorant on after sleeping a good amount of hours. He feels guilty, knowing that he just slept so hard when Sapnap had been driving the entire time.

"My mom wanted to keep her for the night so I could help you settle in a bit," Dream chuckles as his head gets stuck in the loop of his shirt. "Is that cool?"

When his head pops through, his hair is even messier.

And Sapnap laughs.

The two of them stand awkwardly now in the bedroom, probably from the fact that neither of them know where to move, or where to go. Should Dream lead him out? Quickly, and nervously, Dream finds a pair of socks. *The floor is too damn cold.*

"Course it's cool."

But soon, Dream walks him around. Things fall into line. As he expected they would. He points to each door, covers the thermostat and points annoyingly at Sapnap as he tells him to, stay the hell away. Sapnap turns it up immediately.

The air changes as they walk, as Dream shows him the backyard, the swimming pool.

"A pool." Sapnap chucks his shoes off. "A fucking pool, and you never even told me?"

Sapnap leans over it, rolls his jeans up a bit to stick his toes in, to feel the temperature of the water. It's warm, is what he tells Dream. But Dream isn't used to the water. He'd believed Sapnap if he told him it was freezing.

Dream shrugs, shoves his hands into his sweatpants like he doesn't even see the thing in front of him.

"I don't swim," Dream swallows. "My sister likes taking Elytra out here, but I hate when she does because I feel like I need to watch *both of them*."

Sapnap must want to laugh, because he builds up this grin on his face, all smug and simple and sweet. He looks to Dream and bumps into his shoulder.

"*Such a dad*," he whispers. "And a big brother."

"Oh, shut up."

Dream waits for the warmth in his stomach to deflate, but this time, it sticks around. And so does the genuine smile on his face. He doesn't feel afraid of it, of whatever the hell is trying to settle against the pit inside of him.

Later that day, when Sapnap is all settled in and when he's finally using Dream's hot water to rinse off his memories of driving, Dream receives a text from George on his phone.

He waits before he unlocks it.

He's still folding up some of Sapnap's clothes, still humming to the music they have going in the bedroom when he gets it. Two messages.

He takes a breath in, lets it out, slumps his shoulders as he thinks about the moments he's spent with George.

Ever since their last conversation, their last words, Dream has learned that people's voices can really echo sometimes. And it fucking sucks, the way people have this... this right to be inside of his head regardless of how previous words and actions tear him at the gut.

Dream drags his body until it's resting on the edge of the bed. Lazily, his fingers slide until he opens the message.

i'm sorry, d.

i really am.

Dream makes a noise from his mouth, feels absent from himself the minute he licks his lips and peers at the screen. He can nearly hear George's apology, his voice, the sound of him. His heart. His tone. All of him. George is never this forward, never to the point. Dream can taste salt on his mouth as he gnaws on his lip.

You shouldn't have to apologize, Dream writes, barely even registers that he is typing as he does it. **I should be apologizing. There's a lot to talk about.**

George texts back immediately.

you think? but don't tell me not to apologize, dream. you told me you had a kid, and i told you to fuck off and then ignored you for three days. and now i'm supposed to move in with you and your child so soon.

It almost shocks Dream when he gets the message. **You're coming?**

"Shit." Dream places his hand across his heart when he realizes how fast it's beating.

He takes a slow breath in and holds it.

His phone buzzes. **of course, idiot. can we call tonight?**

Dream holds his breath again.

Please, he sends back.



It turns out that Dream hasn't exactly spent two nights in a row without Elytra in... quite some time. So, he clenches his jaw as he presses the phone to his ear, as he listens to his mother speak soft words through the phone to inform him about how their day went. She talks about their outing, about how good Elytra was. She even has to shut Dream up when he asks question after question.

And when his daughter talks gently over the phone in the few words she knows, Dream pretends to understand how she talks about her day.

"I miss you," he tells her. *"I love you."*

She says it back, answers him with a kiss over the phone.

"I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

He's unclear why his throat tightens on the last word, or why his voice cracks, but he hates it. *He misses her.*

When they hang up, Dream hears the soft rattle of knuckles against his door.

Sapnap's smirk stares at him, tired and lazy from their long day. But behind it is the sincerity of understanding, and Dream finds *that* first before he even registers that there is a smirk across his features. He drifts into the amusement of his own smile, already sinking into his mattress. Sapnap giggles.

"Oh, fuck off! You're so annoying." He rolls his eyes and hides his face in his hands.

Sapnap's hands go up in defence. "I just came to say goodnight."

He stands in the doorway, and Dream notices how at home he looks like this—how much he looks like he belongs. He's hardly been here a day, yet Sapnap just fits. Him and his filthy shirt from earlier and his ripped jeans and his stupid grin. It all fits.

Dream's stomach tries not to turn when he thinks about Elytra, about George, about everyone in one place, about what could happen, about what will happen. After all, he's still on the first few steps of the many he needs to take.

"You gonna go to sleep?" Sapnap asks, interrupts the thoughts in Dream's head.

Dream's face drops slightly.

"No, I—Uh, I'm gonna talk to George."

Sapnap scans his face, looks carefully across the sudden paleness of Dream's cheeks to find his horizon of worry.

"You gonna be okay?"

Dream nods slowly, takes a deep breath.

He's told Sapnap. He's offered him every ounce of what had happened between him and George. And Sapnap listened, didn't intervene, but listened to what Dream had to say about it.

The other night, over the phone, Sapnap heard all of Dream's concerns when he frustratingly grunted into the phone about how, *"none of this shit is going to work!"* And how, *"George thinks this is funny—thinks my family is a joke."*

But Sapnap was there to talk sweetly in his ear, to remind Dream that, *"George doesn't think your family is a joke, Dream. He doesn't, and you know it. He's confused, needs time."*

So even now, Dream wonders if Sapnap is going to ask to stay, if he's going to ask if Dream needs support. He can see the flickers behind his eyes, the oversaturation in his step as he leans from side to side.

Dream nods his head. "I'll be okay."

And he hopes he will be.

But for now, his fingertips sweat as the spring amongst his belly goes blue. It's been an orange color all day, light reds and yellows, all warm and rosy from hanging out and cooking with Sapnap. He snagged his finger on one of Sapnap's boxes and therefore spent a good ten minutes groaning over the throbbing sensation while Sapnap chuckled on his bed. But besides that, his belly has been far from nauseous.

He straightens his shoulders, presses against his chair as he traces his mouse over George's name.

It's unlike him to video call George when their tension has choked the both of them, when it's knotted around them like a tight, wet rope. Dream hates the fact that he doesn't even care what he looks like.

All he can do is slouch in his chair and wait for that incoming message, that approval to hit the call button.

When it comes, though, Dream pauses. Every thought freezes where it is hiding, and his blood bleeds cold. *George is calling.*

"Hi." George says. "I have something I want to show you."

Dream doesn't think. He hardly breathes as George's camera comes on, as his face comes into view. It's so late there, as always, but Dream appreciates the fact that he's given up some of his sleep to ease both of their minds.

His face shows tiredness, and Dream even sees some of himself in George—the slant of his eyebrows in concentration, the downward frown of his lips, the careful blush of his cheeks. His flesh can be wrinkled into a smile eventually, and Dream wants to be responsible for it, but all he sees is a frown. It digs the knife further into Dream's chest.

"Okay," Dream nods.

Anticipation is hard to register. Dream taps his foot on the ground as he watches George send him a link.

It's titled; ***Supporting your best friend who has a baby!***

Dream immediately sighs out a laugh, looks over at George to find a smile creeping up his mouth.

He scrolls down until he finds the first passage.

It reads; *So, your best friend is having a baby! Congratulations! Don't be an asshole.*

Dream snickers this time. He doesn't even read onward.

"George," he whispers.

He can't help but chuckle again, hide his face in the palm of his hand when George scoots up in his chair. Doing so, he comes further into the light, and Dream is happy to see his face.

"Read that first bit?" George asks.

"I did."

George hums.

"I couldn't stop thinking—" George squeezes his eyes closed, sighs into his fists, breathes and

breathes again. He peeks up at Dream through his fingers once they splay over his face. “*Hi.*”

Oh. His cheeks have gone pink.

Dream’s belly floats back to warm oranges and reds again, faint yellows, like whatever sunset must’ve set outside his window a while back. He raises his eyebrows and smiles sweetly at George.

“Hey?” Dream murmurs. “What? What were you thinkin’ about?”

George sighs.

“About how I reacted,” he says, takes his hands from his face and sets them against his lap, “with everything you told me. I’ve been thinking about it all, like, a lot.”

“Yeah?” Dream squints his eyes and twists his face up in a way that makes him less afraid.

Because talking to George like this makes him anxious, makes him fear what kinds of words they’ll aim and shoot at each other next. But Dream has hope, as he’s always had—and he’s got Sapnap’s words in his head, about how George needs time.

Perhaps this is George’s time, these moments that tick by, slow, dreadful seconds of silence in their call, sticky, gross hums from the both of them. It’s just *awkward*. It’s unlike them.

“I want to apologize.”

“I said not to.”

“Yeah, but,” George laughs and drops his voice lower, “Dream.”

His eyes say it all. George’s eyes beg for Dream to listen, to play along into his words. So, for once, Dream stops. And he lets George continue.

“What if I told you I was married?” George asks.

Dream furrows his brow. “Well—I mean—That’s like.” George’s eyebrow cocks up, and Dream scoffs at it. “What are you trying to come back at me with?”

He doesn’t want to build that dam back up, doesn’t want to hold water behind his lungs to where he’s begging to release it all. But George’s words are *aimed* at him. Dream is *tense*. He can’t fucking help it.

“I don’t know,” George shrugs. “It’s just information dumped on you, is it not?”

“It is.”

“How would it make you feel?”

Hurt. It’d fucking hurt, George.

At Dream’s silence, George continues.

“What if I told you that this person I married means more than the world to me, and I needed to protect them from that world? What would you feel then?”

It’s *different*.

Dream tears his gaze from George's face and instead focuses on his kneecaps.

"I would understand," — *Is that what you want to hear George?* — "I'd understand, but I would be hurt, I think."

As Dream looks back up at him, he sees George's head cock to the side, the remnants of a sad smile etched so gently across his features. It looks friendly sitting there, but Dream doesn't know how to take it. *Is it even his to take?* Can he even be selfish right now?

George shrugs. "But you wouldn't hate me, would you?"

"Course not. Never. I don't think there's a life where I'd ever hate you, George."

George's mic crumbles a moment, and Dream lifts his chin to find him shifting around. He watches George sit up on his ankles, watches him hold his cheeks with his palms. He blinks slowly, presses his pinky fingers near his eyebrow bones as his smile gets squished between his hands.

Dream wonders if they're warm. Or cold. He's never asked.

Silence is breathable here, and Dream, regardless of the air and the silence, feels like choking. All he does is stare at George.

His chest grows hotter and hotter.

"You get what I'm saying?"

Dream swallows, "honesty? A bit, but—not—not really? You're not married, are you?"

George takes one of his hands from his face and leans against his fist. He chuckles.

"No, I am not," he says. "But there'd be this new person in my life, someone I love. It would be a surprise to *you*, but *you'd* understand. *You'd* get it, but *you'd* still be a little confused, unsure about things, wondering why your friend hadn't told you. But it's okay, because in the end it's not your business," Dream picks out how he's talking about himself, "and you'd try your best to just support your friend."

Dream closes his eyes and rests his fingers over his thighs.

"Marriage is a little different, George," Dream admits.

"I know. It's not my best example, but it's all I got."

Dream laughs quietly.

"Thank you. I appreciate your way of apology. I hear you."

A tired look crosses George's eyes. Dream sees it and vaguely tries to bring it up. They've only just started this call, but Dream wonders if they'll be here for hours to come. He wonders if he should ask George if he'd like to get some sleep—if he should give him that out.

But Dream doesn't want to be selfless tonight.

"Can I try?" Dream speaks up.

George looks all over his screen, up at his camera, from here and there and then around. He nods, already understanding where Dream is headed.

The inside of Dream's chest stiffens, but his breath shudders inside of him until it halts.

"Let's say, whoever you got married to," *George giggles*, "is someone who the media could completely take for their own liking. And you're this young guy who had a—or, I mean, who got married younger than most, and your significant other deserves to be appreciated by your friends and, and of course your family, but you're scared that they might think you—"

"Dream."

Dream looks up at him, his face already uncomfortably twisted, teeth holding his bottom lip.

"You can talk about your daughter, it's okay."

He nods.

And lets go.

"I thought about telling everyone for so long. First it was feelings of worry and fear, and I felt helpless. I knew her mother, too. We were high school friends. It was fucking stupid, but I was lonely and she was lonely, and we had sex. That was it—that was literally it. She got pregnant, she wanted to raise our baby together, and then she changed her mind." Dream simply shrugs. "She wanted me to have her."

"Then she left?" George asks, whispers softly.

Dream nods his head.

"It took so much at first. I felt lost. Between all the stupid court dates and taking care of Elytra, and trying to stay online. I really thought it would be simple, too." He takes a breath and laughs. "For whatever reason, I thought it would be easy, you know—her, uh, her mother and I taking care of her together, managing my life, all that. I felt so weak. She moved out of nowhere. We finally got in contact and got rights signed over. I did literally everything I was supposed to do, but still felt like *I* was the one who fucked that up."

"You didn't."

"I know that now," Dream sighs at him. "I do, I promise. But it was awful. I didn't want to be alone, and my mom would be over. S'hard, thinkin' about it all. Cause—because I'd try not to call you on the verge of tears, ready to tell you about it all."

"Kinda wish you would've."

Dream knows. God, he knows, so he shrugs his shoulders and tries not to cry this time around. He nods and inhales a deep breath.

George must know how it feels inside of Dream's head, and mainly because he's always had an idea. He's always known, especially from when they were younger, when to stop, when to proceed, and when to touch. When anger burns inside of Dream, or when the back of his tongue becomes so bitter, George would just know, and he'd guide Dream out of whatever situation he would be in. He'd extinguish the fire.

But as they sit here, on this call, Dream realizes that there is nowhere to go but toward each other. Or away. So, he shakes his head and lets regret drown him, way more than it already has in the past two years.

There's a flicker outside his window. *Lightning*. And Dream wonders if it'll get powerful enough to cut out his internet, or if Elytra will wake from where she must sleep peacefully at his mom's.

George is grinning at him when he looks back.

"What?" Dream exhales.

"You said *Elytra*," George says as he shuffles closer. "Did you name your daughter Elytra, Dream, like we talked about so long ago?"

Thoughts come to the forefront of Dream's brain. He doesn't feel as much fire underneath him, just warmth. All this—all this talk about two years ago, with Elytra's birth and her first few months thereafter, always put him in a sullen mood. But the recall of George's words tugs at Dream.

"Yeah," Dream smiles shyly. "I named her Elytra."

George's breath catches in his throat. "Cute."

Dream feels suspended to his seat, his feet and knees and thighs all sticky against the material underneath him. He's been so alone recently, that even the respiration of a smile, the hint of a kind word can guide him forward.

The fair winds outside his window increase, and he looks to them in a peculiar gaze, curiosity coating his core.

He itches to know, itches to find out about George and his upcoming trip.

"Do you like storms?" Dream asks him. "It's about to storm."

George raises an eyebrow. "I don't really mind them, I hate when they get scary, but I don't think I've ever really seen too scary of a storm. Why?"

Dream hums. "Because it's about to storm."

Through Dream's headset, George laughs.

"What has that got to do with me?" *A lot*. "Do you want me to stay on the line with you as you sleep?"

"Well," Dream starts, voice playful, "I wasn't going to say that, but I also won't disagree with that."

"Shut up. What were you going to say?"

Dream's eyes flicker between George's.

"I was worried you wouldn't like the weather when you got here," he admits. "But it should be cleared up when you land."

A simple storm, suddenly approaching the both of them and then leaving as quick as it had arrived. Dream wonders if him telling George about Elytra will fade just as quickly as this weather will. He doubts it.

"I'm nervous," George admits.

"About moving?"

“Mhm.”

Dream leans back in his chair and lets the twisted feeling pull him further in. Toward George. Away from him—wherever the hell it is taking him—he doesn’t know; but the way George talks to him, hums against his ear and makes him feel like he’s home—god, he loves it. It’s so sensual, and his stomach eases all pain to relax.

They talk for longer, pour more sugar onto their massive hill of uncertainty.

Dream is unsure where to step with George.

He’s got all this, *“I’d be hurt, but I’d understand,”* lying out in front of him, but, George and him have such guarded steps—boots and shields—and the raw feelings inside of George can’t splay more than he has them splayed at the moment.

Dream can’t ask him if they’re okay, if George is okay, if he’s going to be bothered by his family, his daughter. Because by doing so, he opens an opportunity for George to give him the wrong answer, and Dream doesn’t want that.

But the hope underneath Dream’s skin tells him things are fine. It tells him George is okay with this, with him.

The two of them fall into silence again.

George has a blanket around his shoulders as he reclines in his chair. His knees are up to his chest, and Dream thinks about him living here, in this house, and how he’d check in on him when it got late, how he’d knock softly against the door to make sure George needed nothing before he went to sleep.

Dream does this every night. Double checks the locks, reassures himself that Elytra is safe. But now with Sapnap here, with George soon to be here, he wonders if his need for protecting others will increase.

He sighs.

“Get a blanket,” George whispers.

Dream startles at the sound of his voice. But, he retrieves one, wraps himself up like George is, rubs his cheek against the warmth, kicks his feet forward against another chair, and lets his eyes flutter shut.



Dream wakes around five in the morning. And when he does, he finds George is no longer in his chair, but huddled on his bed, his headset awkwardly loose around his ears.

A tinge of want seers through Dream’s body, and suddenly he’s frowning, wishing he could help George get more comfortable. He knows, god, he just knows that George is going to wake up and complain about how his neck hurts.

Dream is glad he’s moved to his bed at least.

But a little past five in the morning, with over an hour to spare before his mother brings Elytra back home, he knows he has to get ready.

So with a soft sigh, Dream hangs up the call and immediately sends George a message.

My mom is coming soon. Gotta get ready, thx for staying on the call w me. Slept well.

He shuts down his computer and stretches his arms above his head, allowing the entire night to stretch with him.

The windows prove the storm reached nothing more than rain. It's still too dark for Dream to know if the wind had caused any branches or leaves or twigs to drop onto the ground.

He showers, lets warm water claw down his back as his body stands there. It gets hotter and hotter, and yet Dream swallows down the knot he gets in his throat when he thinks about his next stream, about Sapnap meeting Elytra in a couple of hours, about George landing soon, about the two of them touching for the first time. He lets all of those concerns, all of those expectations drip off of him.

He washes his hair, sticks his blunt nails through blond, greasy hair that he's been messing with all night. It's become a habit, notably in the way Elytra presses her palms to his cheeks and then tugs against the strands of his hair. He does it too, now.

And when he's dressed, when he's snuck into the kitchen somewhere close to six-fifteen, he bakes.

He busies his hands in making cinnamon pastries, listening to music with an airpod in as his feet sway from side to side in the kitchen.

Dream's smile extends past his ears when his mother arrives.

He goes a little warmhearted when he sees Elytra. He's spent a while without her, and her sudden presence is a breath of relief for him, just watching her smile turn wider and wider as she spots her father from across the house.

She's got clips in her hair, a dress on, and Dream's lips part at the sight of her.

He takes her into his arms, holding her tight to his chest as her hands stiffen to fists around the back of his neck. For a moment, his heart relaxes in its beats, calms from the massive storm that's been invited into it. He soothes. Dream pulls her sandals from her feet and lets her stand on the counter they don't eat on, both of his hands holding at her waist.

His mother playfully scoffs at the sight.

"You look so pretty," he says in a sweet voice as he looks up at her. He smiles brighter than he has in *days*. Then, he looks at his mother. "So pretty for six in the morning, jeez."

His mother chuckles as she sets down a backpack.

"She wanted to wear this, wouldn't leave without it."

Dream brings his eyes back to Elytra.

"So stubborn." He squints at her and helps her down until she's sitting. "Give me a kiss, I missed you."

He turns his cheek, and she jumps forward at him.

All the while, Dream's mother watches. She falls into place at his house so easily, checking in on the pastries he's baking as if she was the one who had put them in. Even when Dream is across the living room putting the television on, she calls across to ask, "how much longer do these have?"

Dream turns down the volume on their television, not wanting to wake Sapnap, and walks back into the kitchen.

"Should be like... ten minutes? Maybe? Are they looking done already?"

She looks up at him. "Looking burnt already."

Dream's stomach drops as he walks back into the kitchen.

"Shit."

"Clay."

"Sorry." He steps forward with an oven mitt as he looks at the few that are burnt. "Dammit."

She shakes her head at him as she lets him take over again. He pulls them out and lets them rest over the stove, leaning back against the counter to sigh.

They make eye contact, both of them softly letting laughter spew between them in the kitchen.

"Just wanted something good to give you both," he admits, his smile wide across his mouth.

She walks forward to wrap an arm around him, pulls him in to kiss against his temple.

"I'll take one. You know E will eat one, too," she says. "You're fine. It's okay."

Dream groans, though. He's reminded of long nights from before, when his head would feel too weak to even talk, and when his mother would whisper in place of him, trying to dig deep and get rid of all the bad. She did the same when he was a child, but as Dream grew up, it meant more.

His chest feels pleasant as he bites past the cinnamon treat. It's not bad, it's just—well, it's a little burnt. But it's full of sugar and cinnamon, and his taste buds flood with warmth, and he loves it. He feels proud of himself.

Maybe Sapnap would like it, too.

"Thank you," Dream says, voice somewhere soft.

His mother can tell what he means. "Did you get enough sleep?"

"I talked to George for a while. Sapnap and I hung out, and we got him settled."

She looks at him. Dream wonders if he should stop there, because far under his heart, he knows she'll want to ask about how he's doing. With talking to his friends about this. Or how they're taking it all. But he's done so much talking about it, so much worrying, that he just wants to stop.

Instead, she nods her head.

"We'll see each other again when we come back to cook," she says. "Let us know about times and stuff and when George will be getting in."

He hugs her, shuffles closer to press his hand to the back of her neck.

"I'm nervous," he whispers softly, as though it's a secret.

She doesn't need to say anything; she knows already. She just looks at him whole, takes in her son's entire expression and swipes her thumb along his jaw, a frown only slightly present amongst her face. It's reassurance.

Like this, Dream thinks of him and Elytra, and how he'd hope as she gets older, she'd feel close enough to want to tell him when she feels uncertain about life. He wants to be good for her, wants to grow with her, offer the best advice, the most sincere of touches that'll reassure her that her father is here for when she needs him. A hug, a talk, a silent nod of approval, words of encouragement.

A pause fills the air, and Dream's mother nudges him forward.

"Put a couple of those in a dish." She grins. "I wanna take one to your sister."

Once she leaves, Dream kneels down by Elytra's side with a plate of cinnamon pastries and a goofy smile.

"Wanna go meet Sapnap?"

Her chin lifts in curiosity, in a childlike anticipation. She's known, as Dream has spoken about it for a while now, and he suspects his mother has mentioned it. And he's astonished at her ability to slide off the couch and hold the plate as her need to entertain takes over.

She talks, muttering out words like, "daddy's friend," as she takes one hand off the plate—and for a moment Dream sees the entire thing: her overconfidence, the plate toppling to the floor, a mess of dessert and emotions falling with it.

But she manages.

"Two hands, sweetheart, two hands."

She listens, and Dream keeps his fingertips on her shoulder as he guides her to Sapnap's room.

But before he can enter, he bends down toward Elytra and takes a shaky breath in, trying to maneuver around the lodged nervousness inside of him.

"We have to be quiet when we walk in," he tells her. "Okay?"

She just stares at the door.

Silence is too heavy. Dream thinks he's more hesitant than he's ever been before. His pulse just increases triumphantly in harsh thrusts against his neck as he waits.

So, he stops waiting. *Fuck waiting*, he's tired of that.

"Okay, let's go."

Dream steps inside the room, not really remembering if he had asked Sapnap if it would be okay to, well—walk in on him, sleeping or not. Luckily, Dream sees Sapnap's leg twitch and tuck under the covers and when he looks up to his face, he sees his smile fade. He's awake.

Dream finds a grin expanding onto his cheeks.

"Shh," he hesitates before he presses his knee into the end of the bed. "Come here."

He doesn't say much else. He just guides Elytra up by Sapnap's ankles and encourages her to hold on to the plate as tight as she can. "Strong, strong, strong!"

Meanwhile, his heart speeds up again, but this time it settles gently in his stomach. He feels warm here, more confident than he's felt, because now Sapnap is here, in this bed, and he's about to open his eyes and meet Elytra for the first time.

It's so *scary*, but Dream can practically smell his own eagerness.

He hums at the back of Sapnap's neck, leans forward and pinches at his lower back underneath the covers. Sapnap swings his hand back to hit him, but keeps his eyes closed. He starts giggling. And Elytra follows along, and all together, Dream tries desperately not to swoon.

"Wake up!" Dream exclaims.

"K'up!"

Sapnap's eyes open.

The bed is warm, accompanied by two friends who have never woken up together, and the soft beat of a child's heart, who presents an attentive smile and cinnamon pastries.

Sapnap stifles a yawn, exaggerates a stretch and playfully groans as he sits up.

"I'm up, I am up!"

Elytra pushes the plate toward him. Dream watches with a hard swallow.

It's just Sapnap.

Surely, Sapnap's own chest must be flooded with nerves, with a gentle morning's weight only to be relieved by the kindness of his friend and his friend's daughter who he hasn't even been properly introduced to yet and—*fuck*, yeah, maybe Dream is just slightly nervous about this.

Looking between Elytra and the plate, Sapnap carefully widens his eyes and parts his mouth into a gasp.

"Is this for me?" He asks.

She nods and pokes her finger right into one, indenting the top of it.

Dream cackles.

"Elytra." His own cheeks go rosy at her act.

Sapnap laughs.

Laughs from his stomach, from his chest, from his heart.

"Wanna split it?" Sapnap asks her, already tearing off a piece.

Dream gnaws on his lip. "I kind of burnt 'em."

It's the eye contact with Sapnap that makes Dream feel even more timid. But the small breaths of his turn into miniscule laughter, all quiet and fragile.

Sapnap hands the smaller of the piece to Elytra and then looks at Dream. He cocks his head to the side and sends his sticky, sugar-coated hand into Dream's still-damp hair. With a drag down, Sapnap pulls him toward him until their foreheads almost bump, but he just grazes his lips against Dream's ear.

"She's fucking beautiful, Dream," he whispers, nods his head again and again until Dream latches back on and nods with him.

He eases into the embrace.

He's okay. *They're okay.*

Sapnap's eyes stay fixed on Elytra when they all get more comfortable on the bed.

There's bound to be crumbs all over the place, but none of them care. Dream doesn't care because he feels content, relieved, above the moon and beyond it as he watches Sapnap enjoy the burnt pastries, as he watches him chuckle and make Elytra laugh.

"She's not even shy, either," Sapnap says to Dream. "Most kids I know are usually shy around new people."

Dream looks toward her as she stares down at his phone, at the YouTube video playing.

"I don't know," he answers. "Honestly, she was just excited. She gets like that. But when it's a bigger crowd, she'll stick close to me. I guess since it's just you, she's more open."

Sapnap nods his head and regards her again.

"The facial features too. Looks just like you. Bridge of her nose, the eyes, the smile. Hair's darker, but."

He looks so amazed.

And Dream is so *shy* about it.

He's just watching as Sapnap looks back and forth and as he grins and then stops and then grins again. It's sweet, and Dream isn't used to it.

A ding distracts him, though, and he notices the notification on his phone quickly.

"Can I," he lightly tugs it from Elytra's hand, "borrow this, thank you."

She immediately pouts at him.

"Dream!" Sapnap laughs and turns his head to Elytra. "That was mean, huh?"

"Oh, come on, we're gonna go downstairs, anyway." Dream falls on his back and checks his messages that he had been missing.

Two from his mother. One from George. Three from two different unknown numbers.

He leaves the unknown messages alone, knowing that for whatever reason, his number somehow gets out online, and people end up texting him. It's a few, and this time it seems to be two different people. So, with a quick slide of his finger, he blocks the numbers, and deletes the messages. He tries not to read random messages, knowing that sometimes one of them may catch his eye and maybe it'll encourage him to text back.

He texts his mom about how she had forgotten to drop off Elytra's blanket she always sleeps with. Dream promises to pick it up later on.

Then there's George.

A simple, lowercase message with the words, **slept well, miss you.**

Dream recalls their night.

Softly spoken words. Opening up. George telling him to get a blanket. Waking up to see him on his bed.

His head spins and his throat goes dry, but the heat of a smile tries to crawl up his mouth. In the bottom of his stomach sits sincerity, and Dream squints his eyes as he thinks about trying to blink it away. He wonders if taking in deep breaths will push it farther.

No matter how hard Dream tries not to picture it, he thinks of George on this bed with the three of them. Would he fit in? Yeah, right?

I always miss you when we stop calling, he writes and immediately shuts his phone.

He takes a deep breath right after, wondering if his message had been too forward. "Oh."

Sapnap raises an eyebrow at him, but Dream tells him he's fine.

Because he is. He's *fine*.



Except for when he's not. Except for when George is texting him at three in the morning with those same lowercase letters that he's been using the few days until his departure, reminding Dream that he's steps away from the plane that will lead them straight to each other.

Dream's hand tracks up and down Elytra's back, up and down the light pink shirt against her skin.

She's woken up just twice, and each time she scoots closer to him, her cheeks rosy and her lips drawn to a sulk. And when Dream finds her sleepy eyes, he just encourages her he's there, promises her she can go back to sleep.

So now, he holds his phone in one hand and keeps his brightness on low and listens to the machine emit rain sounds and white noise.

about to board, George texts.

As Dream reads, he realizes how real it is. Lying here, understanding how George will fly into Orlando, with suitcases to his name. Dream is already getting packages shipped to his house with George's name on it. He has them placed right on the inside of his bedroom door.

He's even got clean sheets and a comforter all folded up on George's mattress.

Dream isn't sure if George will prefer them. He'll buy him new ones if he wishes, but he wanted him to have something to come home to. They didn't even talk about that. *Should they have?*

Don't be nervous. Take a nap.

more like go to bed. gonna be like 8000 hours.

Dream snickers at his phone.

Don't be dramatic, he tells him. **You'll be here in no time.**

He flip-flops his phone for a few moments, turns it around and re-opens the messages as he waits for George to text back. Dream's got plenty of time before George boards. Plenty of time to remind him to be safe, to tell and retell him that everything is going to be okay. He supposes maybe George is busy, handing someone his ticket, showing someone his boarding pass from his phone. Dream isn't sure if it's mobile or not.

Does George even like airports?

He tries to rid the tightness in his throat, attempts first with a clearing, hush enough to not wake Elytra from her sleep.

But when five minutes turn to ten, Dream trudges along alone at three in the morning and feels this large, emotionless annoyance weighing him down, telling him that George is already in the air.

He's getting ahead of himself.

But even if George was already in the air—even if he was already halfway to Dream, it would be okay. He tries to simmer, but there's no water to ease his fire.

Then.

There's a text.

got my seat :)

Dream tosses his head back into his pillows.

Soft, cold cushioning presses to his ears. Surrounds him. And for a moment, he doesn't move. Doesn't even breathe. He just listens to the white noise and squeezes his eyes tight.

He leans up and takes his hand off of Elytra's back.

Good. "Say something else," he tells himself, and proceeds to write, **I will be there to pick you up. Don't be nervous George!!!!!!**

more nervous about seeing you and everyone.

Everyone.

My family.

His smile vanishes out over his face, becoming vacant amongst the features like his lips and the tip of his nose.

The only thing that eats away at him now is the thought of George's unhappy face showing up in his house. But Dream pushes the thought away.

George sends another message. **don't overthink. i mean that i'm nervous about how we'll all be around each other. so used to seeing each other online, might lose some stuff we used to do, you know?**

Dream furrows a brow.

What do you mean? He asks.

George's three dots appear and then disappear. They're losing time, wasting it, and Dream is coloring their lines with worry.

nothing, dw. you're excited too?

Dream sighs. *He wants to drop it.* **Course(: You still ok with my family being here when you get to the house?**

He looks over to the curtains, thick and swaying slightly from the intensity of the fan. Dream stares, flickers his gaze as he thinks about George. He tries not to speculate too hard, but everything he looks at reminds him of George, of the conversation they're having, of the conversations they've had, conversations they could have.

He's terrified, and as much as he wants to avoid it, he can't.

Dread is cold inside of him, coats his insides, takes over every inch of his skin like it owns him.

yes :) taking off now. don't be late, u dick. im never going to forgive u if you let me sit alone in an airport on my first thirty minutes there :(

Dream cracks a smile. **Could never. See ya soon, Georgie. Safe flight.**

He buries his head into his hands and coughs out as much dread and fear and worry as he can. His muscles tense up as his shoulders roll forward near his neck. His breath melts back into his lungs as he takes breaths.

Later, when he sleeps, he focuses on Elytra and her presence that eases him.

And when they both wake, they find Sapnap cooking breakfast with Dream's mother, both of them in their own laughter.

He grins at the two of them and picks up Elytra into his arms. Somewhere between staring at all the laughter and the sizzling from the oven, Dream notices the tables full of an assortment of foods. There are board games, too, some pool floats. Dream cackles.

"Are we having a pool party for George?" He laughs.

His mother looks up.

"Morning!"

It's nice to see both his mother and Sapnap in the same space, seeing as how Dream spent so many years just talking about how he wished to hang out with his friends. He remembers pushing himself next to his mother in bed and showing her plane tickets to Texas, promising that he'd work extra hard for an allowance. He'd show her hotels near Sapnap's house and everything. But things never worked out.

So seeing them beside each other now makes Dream feel closer to whole. It gives him a slight thrill, just knowing that even now, at nine in the morning, they're at least somewhat hours closer to picking up George, and maybe even *he* will look like home in this kitchen.

Even in different ways. Even if Dream's heart turns differently for his friends. He knows that home is still... home.

"Pool party," Sapnap pipes up. "Absolutely, man."

Dream rolls his eyes.

He sits Elytra at the little table she has. His mother sets down a plate of whatever they've been cooking—eggs, it seems. "Eat up," he tells her.

They eat together at the table. Sapnap watches Dream the entire time, blinking at him like he's in his veins. He must be, because Dream can feel him in there, reading him like he's some inside of a book. Maybe he knows what thoughts are mixing around in Dream's head because as Dream lifts the left side of his mouth into a smile—Sapnap lifts his right.

Dream taps lazily on the table and hears to the conversation that Sapnap holds. He hardly listens, though.

He just thinks about the sheets in George's room. He thinks about how he should dress Elytra. If she should take a bath before later. He thinks about if Drista will come, or what time.

Sapnap bounces his toes against Dream's in order to distract him, and Dream shows his appreciation with that half grin again.

He supposes that time just passes quicker than you want it to sometimes, especially when your body and your mind and your goddamn heart are all in this hopeless mode about your best friend showing up.

He's already done this once, but—well to be fair, Sapnap kind of showed up in front of his bed while he was sleeping, and Dream wishes George would somehow do the same.

No thinking. No preparation. Just appearing.

There's this other thought that is in Dream's head right now—besides all the ones that have to do with George, because they all have to do with George—but holy shit, he just wishes he were here already, eating fucking steaks and barbeque with his family that is about to show up. Or, taking in the view from the second-story bedroom, and watching a storm if it comes.

He just keeps wanting and wanting and wanting.

To his surprise, Drista shows up after a couple more hours. She clings to Elytra like a magnet, but Dream stops her.

"She needs a bath."

Drista shrugs. "So I'll give her a bath."

Dream makes a disapproving sound with his mouth.

Sapnap chuckles from where he's helping cook. Dream's hands are wet from washing them and for a moment he considers flicking them over at his sister.

“Come on,” she groans, “it’ll be fine. Come check on us if you want. You should stay and help cook.”

Dream looks to Sapnap, who gives him the most sincere smile. He nods. *It’s an encouragement.*

“Fine—I, Fine. Go.”

She cheers and wiggles her fingers toward Elytra.

“Make sure you put towels down where you’re gonna be,” he reminds her.

“I know what to do, Clay.”

“And she doesn’t like the baby towels, so, when she’s ready to get out, make sure you—”

“Sapnap!” Drista groans as she holds Elytra. “Take care my brother, please.”

“Dream.”

“Watch for her eyes!”

Sapnap drags him into the kitchen.

As they cook, Dream wracks up nerves.

Sapnap catches on and tries to lighten the mood, but the bitter taste fattens Dream’s tongue stronger than he wants it to. It tastes all funny, even when he goes to taste the sauces they’re preparing.

Music plays in melodies around him, distracting him from whatever nonsense he is trying to avoid, but it’s still not enough.

“I have an idea.”

Dream turns to Sapnap and pays attention to the gentle hands that are on his shoulders. It’s a faint touch, but Dream tells himself it must be Sapnap’s way of trying to dig him out.

“Where are we going?” Dream questions, tipping his chin upward when he sees another family member arrive. It’s someone else he should greet, but Sapnap promises him they can do it all later.

He pushes Dream toward Elytra’s playroom.

“We can—shit—is she still in the bath?”

Dream realizes how messy the room is and bends down to shove toys into bins across the place. Too much clutter, too many things.

“Dream,” Sapnap’s voice pulls his eyes closer. “Come here.”

He places three pieces of paper on the long table, and Sapnap’s knees dig into the carpet soon as he sets a box out.

They look at each other.

Sapnap smiles. Wide. “We’re going to make George some welcome home cards.”

“Elytra’s in the bath.”

“I didn’t say it was for her, only,” Sapnap draws a large W on his paper and then crumbles it up. He grabs a new one and instantly sighs. “Okay, I might be bad at this. Elytra and I were coloring last night, and I thought it would be a good idea. I don’t fucking know.”

Dream relaxes against his shoulder, allows for his cheek to slide down the skin on his forearm.

Sapnap’s eyes flicker toward him and he sighs, handing Dream a brown marker. He grips it, pulls the cap off and stares at the paper in front of him. He thinks of drawing a smile, a dog, he thinks of copying something that Elytra has drawn before—something he has up on his wall, something on his desk. Some flowers.

Instead, he thinks of George. Of his favorite things.

And Dream draws.

Chapter End Notes

HELLOOOO.

George's arrival next chapter... Dream's nervous. I'm nervous. But I'm excited :]
Please let me know what you think of this chapter, leave a comment if you'd like!!

I always appreciate it more than anything.

Thank you so much :)

three

Chapter Summary

He wants to say something about how new all of this is—how George's cheeks are rosier, or how his nail beds are much smoother than Dream imagined they'd be up close. But he's thought so much about him he doesn't even see any differences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He's screwed. He's so, so screwed.

Dream's car is filthy. Empty water bottles, Drista's school bag, clips from Elytra's hair, random crumbled receipts, and half-eaten goldfish bags all spread across the rear bench. A jacket. An umbrella—not even his, but he trusts it has to be one of Drista's friends who left it. It doesn't look familiar. He's not even sure when he started driving people around.

As he peers back at the mess, he thinks for a moment about how turning around to rid the car of the useless items wouldn't be the worst idea he's ever had. Maybe making George wait an extra second or two will get him called a dick, but that's already predicted at some point.

There's no traffic.

But Dream wishes there would be.

He prefers these roads full of cars and trucks and motorcycles so he could draw his palms from the wheel and lazily slouch in his seat. He prefers them overcrowded so he can tug on the turtleneck that he's dreadfully chosen to wear, and just breathe for a minute.

He thinks about the navy material against his chest and against his neck—how foolish of a choice he's made in this unwanted heat.

Traffic means time, means a few extra minutes to himself. Dream needs that, seeks that, wishes and pleads and begs for it as his foot digs further onto the accelerator. He's not slowing down. He doesn't want to. The airport is near, which means George is nearer.

And if George is close, that pushes him further into his vicinity. Dream understands that in less than twenty minutes, *maybe thirty, with the parking he has to get done*, that George will be here.

Here.

To where Dream can pick out every one of his freckles, every strand of hair. He'll be here, taking breaths and laughing. Dream will watch his chest rise, he'll watch where his pulse flutters against the curve of his neck. He'll see how George licks his lips at the end of every sentence, how his hand presses to his nose while he waits for replies.

Because Dream notices these things through a computer screen. Some of them are of better quality than others, depending on the day. Like when George stayed on call with him, despite being sick. When his cheeks were miles beyond pink, and when Dream nearly begged for his internet to work

because all he could see were goddamn pixels.

Their words floated up like their passion had that night, glowing like glitter underneath the sun. Dream remembers how tight his jaw had been the next morning from the things he held behind his teeth. He remembers the bitter taste of regret, of simmering hope. He almost asked George to send him a photo through that thick silence they spoke in.

He could've been bold that night.

But life always slows to a pale flame when he wants a burning fire.

Dream's hands don't tremble over the steering wheel when he pulls into the parking lot. He doesn't falter as he steps out from the car, or as he tucks all of those scattered items underneath the driver's seat. He works confidently. He pushes and pulls through an excess amount of thoughts, sure, but his body stays strong.

He tugs against his turtleneck again, unknowingly messing with it to where it unfurls.

The heat is rough, but Dream is elated about the lack of rain. If it were rainy, his mood would have been much more dull, more sticky and gooey. Instead, today, he's just got the burning sun against his clothed shoulders to deal with.

And a pounding heart. Nervous feet.

He locks his car and heads inside.

There are couples, and families and people who seem to travel alone. They're all dressed differently, some of them in sweats, in business attire, jeans and a t-shirt. The children of a family laugh and parents nervously scramble through bags as they look for boarding passes while they walk through the parking garage. Dream thinks of Elytra as he pockets his keys.

He wonders if she'd sit well on a plane. He sighs. *It's unlikely*, he thinks, for a two-year-old to sit so still on a flight, to stick her fist into a container that Dream would open, to open Cheerios and eat them like it'll be something that'll distract her for the duration of the trip.

Dream thinks he'd give her airpods. Have her watch Game of Thrones. Anything with a good plot.

Fuck, he's nervous.

He nearly misses the elevator doors when he grabs the phone out of his back pocket, laughter settling past his lips. The couple in front of him stares, but he apologizes for jumping into their elevator at the last second.

George's message is on his phone, but Dream has yet to unlock it. He's all squished up in the elevator's corner as he tries to block out the sounds of two people talking about missing their flight. He feels for them, he *really* does, but he's going to be the first one out of this elevator as soon as they get to the main floor.

i landed and im so tired its absolutely incredible, George's message reads.

Dream glares at it as he opens their messages, already sighing in relief, knowing that George is no longer in the air. Settled and safe. *Here*. Shit. He chuckles and sends him something back about how he should've slept longer. George sends a cursing emoji in return.

He swiftly bolts from the elevator and makes his way inside to where the baggage claim is, looking

between the different ones. He looks up, tries to make out the lettering to find George's flight.

Are you still on the plane?

George texts, **no. getting things verified**

Oh, customs? Is it taking a while? How long will that be? Thought you get your bags first?

uhhh one second

Dream takes a breath and grabs a seat on the bench he finds. Bags come out on the belt in front of him and he watches people tug them off. He thinks about technique, about how quickly he should snag George's few suitcases from the roundabout-moving-belt-machine-thing-*fuck-where-is-George?!*

To his left, another flight's bags roll out, and Dream notices that in lettering above it blinks London. *The damn sign is going out*, but Dream can clearly understand that George's bags are about to come out and George is not even here yet.

There are people surrounding now, and Dream stands nervously, heart up in his throat and eyes darting around cautiously. His tongue is dry, and he wishes desperately that he would have brought his water bottle for times like this. But he swallows, swallows fear and nervousness and excitement—god, he swallows it down, but most of it stays and tingles on the tip of his tongue, and he has to cough before it all rips out of his mouth.

He nearly trembles in anticipation when people pull their bags from the belt.

This has to be another flight from London, Dream thinks.

A weight presses sharply into his shoulder before it fades away, all just as quick as it had come.

"The red ones!" Dream hears. "There's four! Right there."

Dream doesn't even get a moment to think about the voice, because suddenly George is standing in front of him. Hands that were just on Dream are now gripping on the handle of one of the four suitcases, yanking and pulling it to the ground. George smacks his hands against his jeans to clear it of dust.

Then he goes for another.

And for just a moment, Dream stares.

His lungs bring in thick air and he draws out even thicker air as he grabs one of the other suitcases—just until all of them are found, just until he and George are panting and sweating and chuckling.

Dream notices the turn of George's mouth when they finally face each other over the suitcases that separate them. Four awfully filthy suitcases that belong to George, whose sweat drips off his brow and whose tired eyes turn the slightest bit toward mischief.

"Four, George?" Dream places a hand on his chest as he inhales. "Really?"

George looks up at the signs and turns. It's the wrong direction, but Dream doesn't have the heart to tell him yet.

"I'm moving! What do you expect me to pack? A single bag?"

Dream cocks his head in a different direction, encouraging him to follow. George does.

“Yeah,” he adds. “Shirt. Pants. Boxers. Socks.”

George giggles from behind him, and Dream doesn’t even have the confidence to turn right now. George is everywhere. In his ears. Behind him. He must be staring at his back, his thighs, his heels, his neck, his hair.

And all Dream can do is listen to him blindly. As he’s done for so many years.

“What about a toothbrush?”

Dream waves him off. “Buy that shit here!”

“And what about my pillow?”

His heart still hammers in his chest, but it slows when they reach where George needs to be for customs.

“Pillow?” Dream questions, voice close to teasing as he drags the suitcases closer to George. He looks at him. *Since when were his shoulders this broad?* “You brought an entire fucking pillow?”

A smirk rises on George’s face as he slouches against his luggage.

Dream keeps his eyes on him the entire time.

They’re keeping up this act. This, *whatever they’re going to call it later*, sort of act that has the both of them locked in a hot-blistering vision. George stares at Dream with this sideways grin on his face, with half-lidded eyes—and Dream thinks about who he is. His best friend, who has just travelled over miles and miles and miles, *and even more miles* of ocean, just to get to him. George, who he’d stay up with to help edit videos, George who seeps into the furthest of his cracks.

George who pours water on his fires and who will apologize into late hours of the night if accidentally stepping on the backs of Dream’s heels.

George who doesn’t know jack shit about Dream’s secrets, George who he’s lied to, George who is going to meet Elytra when the clock drags them further toward home.

It takes some time, but Dream gives George space, and he finishes up with clearing through customs. And before Dream knows it, they’re squished up in the parking garage elevator with a shit-ton of luggage and an old couple returning from New York.

For what it’s worth, George smells good.

He doesn’t smell like hours spent on a plane or like the recirculation of air conditioning. When he walks past Dream to tread alongside him, Dream gets a nose full of citrus, some spice far underneath it.

The car isn’t a long walk.

In fact, Dream takes the time to think of the sudden presence of George being closer to his things. The thought of showing George a bigger part of him makes him shudder against his ribs.

His keys come out of his pocket first, and then his phone as he sends Sapnap a quick text to let him know they’re about to leave the lot. Dream still can’t turn to George as he bends down at the inside of the door to open the trunk. His heart is thumping and thumping and he can taste his own

concern.

"Should I put these two back here?" George asks quietly.

Dream peers at him as he tosses his wallet onto the front seat. "You can," he awkwardly says, "here. One sec."

He starts with the second seat, jogging around the car to get to George.

"Let's put the lighter one on here." He lifts it and shoves it behind the driver's seat. "And then—wait, hand me that one. Does that one have the damn pillow in it?"

Dream's body twists around from where he's half inside the car, and he looks at George from an upside-down angle. Still, he sees the grin on his face. George nods.

"Give me that one."

For five minutes they nudge and maneuver the suitcases, arguing playfully about how George really had to choose the biggest suitcases in the entire goddamn world. It's all innocent anger as they talk, all lightly bitten words they try to speak in to unfreeze the air. Because the longer Dream thinks of it, the more it's going to kill him—but George is coming home. To his home.

When they slide into the front seats, when the doors all close behind them, and after Dream checks all the mirrors and his surroundings again and again to stall the time, he sighs in relief.

"God, George," he chuckles as he shifts his shoulder. The eye contact is there, but Dream nearly closes his eyes to avoid it. "Remind me never to ask you to move in again."

He does it to make George laugh, for the intention of stopping the gnawing inside of his nervous stomach. But as he meets George's gaze, he sees nothing more than rising tones of velvet, soft and brown eyes that spread a steadiness of patience.

George doesn't laugh.

So Dream drops his smile.

"Hi," George says under his breath.

Dream feels his mouth water underneath his tongue. His upper lip twitches as he struggles to say something back.

The eyes in front of him narrow, and George's grin spreads profusely over the course of his face.

"Come here," George speaks as his arms open.

The sound of Dream moving across the middle console fills the car.

And suddenly he's barreling into George, sticking his nose right into the crevasse of George's neck as he takes in more spice than citrus, as hot eagerness overflows his chest.

George's fingers lock at the nape of his neck, touch patiently over the ends of his hair. Dream can feel the faint touch of his lips over his clothed shoulder, the imprint of George's exceedingly grateful smile. His touch is delicate, but he fiddles with the back of Dream's turtleneck, fixes it until it's in the right position again. Dream hardly pays any mind to it. He just lets his palms run over George's back in slow movements until the skin of his hands feel numb.

"George," he whispers.

The name he speaks startles him. He wants to breathe it repeatedly until it sounds foreign to him. His throat goes raw as he tries to open his mouth, but all that he can do is shut it, press his lips together until he feels his skin pushing back against his teeth.

It's the first time he's allowed himself to relax against a touch like this in a while, the first time he's let his mind and his body all sink into something, bury into it with as much honest emotion as he can push into it.

"Nice to finally know your hair is a lot softer than it looks." George pulls away and brings his eyes up to where Dream parts his hair.

Instinctively, Dream's hands shift upward, and he smooths out his hair.

"Does it not look soft through the computer?"

George sighs and slouches in his seat, and for a moment Dream doesn't think he looks any different.

He wants to say something about how new all of this is—how George's cheeks are rosier, or how his nail beds are much smoother than Dream imagined they'd be up close. But he's thought so much about him he doesn't even see differences.

It's like he's still looking through the screen.

Now, he feels the huffs of his breath on the exposed skin of his wrist when he breathes. And Dream doesn't mind that in the slightest.

George still beams up at Dream's hair. "Gonna be honest," he chuckles until his whole body laughs. "No. Your hair looks so much drier through your webcam, Dream."

Dream realizes that he's been looking at George for too long. From mouth to eyebrows to eyelashes. From cheeks to collarbones to shoulders. All while George laughs like it's the first time in days for him. *And maybe it has been.*

"Dude," Dream rolls his eyes. "C'mon."

He covers his hands over the steering wheel as his back shifts on the seat. Through soft playing music, through random commercials playing on the radio, Dream pulls them out of the parking garage.

A part of him is apologetic for not playing one of his own playlists, for not putting something on that the two of them would enjoy. But Dream is lost between a sunken ship and a newly flipped boat. He's drowning on the surface of cold saltwater and is desperate to find fresh air. And in his case, the commercials on the radio are his way of filling the awkward silence in the car.

He watches as George's eyes look around at the scenery. As he studies the traffic of the cars and buses and motorcycles and trucks. His fingers touch the glass of the window, mess with the buttons against the seat. Dream doesn't miss the way his eyes find the car seat in the back.

"I'm glad you made it, George." Dream gulps, begging to pull George's eyes away from what he's looking at.

George turns his body.

“Do you know how exhausted I am?”

Dream smiles at the way George’s cheek squishes up against the headrest.

He looks between him and the road. “How exhausted?”

George’s eyelids flutter shut.

“Okay, well, there’s like,” Dream uses his elbow to shove George from the way he’s slouching further in the passenger seat, “an entire pool party waiting for you at my house, so—if you need me to cancel it, I will, but.” Dream shrugs.

George regards him, and Dream doesn’t mean to fall weak to the look he gives him, but he can’t help the way his own lip gets tugged into his mouth.

“No, no,” George sits up further. “Please. I’m actually excited about that.”

Dream shakes his head from side to side as he stares forward. Lines pass.

“You’re such a liar.”

“Shut up!” George laughs. “I am!”

“You’re? A liar? Yeah, George, I know.”

George’s laugh is warm with honey, thick like molasses, and Dream doesn’t get too deep into it to become sticky, but his ears turn red at how sweet it sounds.

He’s used to George at the shell of his ear, used to the way George cleaves to the tip of his tongue with every muffled joke he swears out past the late hours of the evening, and into the early mornings. But here, he’s so loud that Dream becomes idled to his seat in a stunned silence over how real he is.

He’s waited so long.

Waited so long to joke around with him like this, to look at him when he hears the slightest hesitation in the inhalation of his breaths.

“You’re the worst,” George mutters, a smile meekly rising onto the shyness of his face.

“Oh, I bet I am.”

The ride back home goes smoothly. They sit through some afternoon traffic as Dream dials up the volume of the radio. They get stuck with most of the commercials, but neither of them say anything.

As they get closer to the house, Dream’s belly churns with unnecessary nerves. Sapnap must know they’re almost there, and maybe he’s got Elytra with him, or maybe she’s with Dream’s sister. Maybe they’re in the backyard underneath the sun already. Maybe she’s got watermelon between her teeth, or maybe her face is all pinched from the sour taste of the popsicles his mother has brought over.

Dream shoves down his thoughts as he struggles to bring something, *anything* up about his family while he pulls through the streets of his neighborhood.

He’s stopped by the own threat of his heart, his fear that rushes like a slow stream up the column

of his spine.

He did not think for a moment that there would be this many cars outside of his home, ones that he recognizes as his uncle's and his uncle's fiancée's.

"Big party?" George jokes, but Dream looks at him with this sincere face of apology.

"I'm sorry."

George unbuckles when they pull into his spot of the driveway. "Why? I told you it would be fine."

"I know—" he squeezes, releases, and then squeezes the steering wheel again as he shifts his eyes to George, to the glassiness that holds his heart. "But, still. I wanted it to be—This was supposed to be your special first day. You, me, Sapnap, *Elytra*."

Dream catches his breath in his throat before his voice can go shaky.

Lucky. He's lucky.

He waits to see a hint of honesty, of openness and truth beyond George's lashes. But George doesn't look fearful, and Dream wants to drop to his knees and thank him for not looking so terrified of what is beyond the front doors—his life, his child, his lies, his past, his hopelessness and desperation and the truth.

Fear is a game. And Dream has been playing it ruthlessly since he's picked up George, pretending as though he isn't scared.

But every time he hears a noise, he thinks Sapnap will walk out to the garage freezer, or to the trunk of his own car—and maybe he'll have Elytra with him, and perhaps then George will see it all and recognize that this life is a joke. *A joke*.

"Your uncle wants to meet me, Dream," George jokes.

"My uncle doesn't even know who the hell you are," he snickers as he opens the car door. "He came for the free food and beer."

George cackles at that.

"Maybe that's why I came as well."

Dream's hand holds up his middle finger, and George tries to give it right back, but his wrist hits the top of the car, and they both laugh.

Getting through the door has Dream's legs wobbling.

It's easy.

It's a matter of pushing the few suitcases right on the inside of the garage door. One after the other. After the other. Until all of them are finally on the tiles of the house.

He loves this house, all the memories he has in it, all the late nights, the tough nights, the frustration and pent up anger, the growing up he's done in such a short time. He's been alone for so long that he doesn't realize these tiles don't belong to him anymore. These locks aren't solely his responsibility anymore, aren't his to focus on when he comes home every time.

He peeks around at the entryway, tilts his ear toward the direction of the kitchen, hoping to hear people. He receives silence.

George follows behind him, leans against the wall once he makes it inside, looks from wall to wall to picture frames around him.

Dream doesn't realize how bland this area looks until he watches George examine it.

"Uh, it's a little empty over here." Dream laughs nervously.

George shrugs his shoulders. "It's nice."

There is laughter in the distance, and Dream knows that the doors to the backyard must be open—everyone must be out there already, their hands wrapped around coke bottles and bodies dipping underneath the pool, enjoying the upcoming summer heat, still dampened by the downfall of spring.

But Dream's feet glue onto the floor, and he longs for it to swallow him whole.

George is here, in his home, and no matter how hard Dream tries not to think about it, he thinks about it. He wants in, in, in George's head, wants to press palms to cover his ears until all he can get is his heartbeat. A thick, soft flutter of a pulse against him. Maybe then he could hear George.

What are you thinking, George? Are you seconds from laughing at me for hiding something from you? Are you scared?

"Hey," he hears to his left.

But it's not George.

Instead, his sister stands there, a frozen loaf of bread in her hands. She's in a hurry, goggles on her head and her hair dripping onto the floor as she walks toward the garage.

"Hey," Dream stares at her. "You're soaking the floor!"

She nods her head. "I know. Uh, move?"

Dream steps out from the door and watches her dart away. He squints and looks back to George, whose eyebrow has already risen with humor and curiosity.

"That's—that's my sister. I don't." Dream leans against the door and opens it until he sticks his head out. "I don't think she actually just realized who you were." Then he howls in her direction. "Drista! Did you just ignore George?"

She slams the freezer shut.

"Did I, oh my—"

Her voice tears open with a screech as she runs back to wrap George in a bone-crushing hug. They exchange kind words with each other, both of them in high smiles and with tender eyes. She smells like chlorine and gets George's shirt all wet, but he doesn't seem to mind, and for that, Dream's heart melts and calms.

Drista's voice must have expanded across the entire house, because soon, Sapnap pokes his head around the corner of the hallway and drops his shoulders into a lazy position as he takes steps toward the few of them. Drista laughs at his presence and leaves them.

“There’s no way what I am seeing is real,” Sapnap mutters. “George. George. George. In my house?”

Dream scoffs.

He enters dramatically, and *painfully slow*, but as he strides into the embrace, their foreheads press together and Sapnap wraps his hand around George’s neck in the same way George had done to Dream earlier, but this time higher in the depths of his hair.

Dream almost wants to look away to give them their own moment of intimacy, but Sapnap grabs at the front of Dream’s shirt and yanks him into their brief hug.

George looks at him like he is fragile.

And honestly, Dream stops breathing. It’s a heart-filling silence he rests in as he holds his breath and counts to five, letting his hands slide around Sapnap and George’s waists like he’s rippling the new forbidden waters around them. He looks toward the ceiling and flushes out all the air in his lungs and listens to the throbbing at his ears.

This is good.

The three of them.

But there’s four, Dream thinks and swallows hard, and pulls away from the embrace that they are in. The water up at his throat is electric, buzzing and shedding the skin that burns.

They laugh, and Sapnap jokes around with George for a few minutes as they lean against the walls in the entryway.

Sapnap can tell through the painful haze of Dream’s body that he is not lemon and yellow, but turning dim and blue, and he lazes his way to rest a hand on Dream’s shoulder.

“She’s up in your room, sleeping.”

Dream turns his way and rests his fingers on the boy’s hip to thank him. He wonders if he should say something now, to George, or if he should walk him into the kitchen.

He faces George with a smile, ushers him forward to another hall nearby.

“Let’s put these in your room,” he tells him.

Sapnap’s smile warms up as he assists with the bags. Dream thanks him kindly, although they aren’t really his bags to begin with. He still feels it’s his responsibility to thank Sapnap for helping with anything these days. Even when it comes to the smallest things. Sapnap doesn’t turn Dream’s way, which he doesn’t expect him to, but he does turn to George to offer a grin.

“We actually made you something,” he says.

George startles at this. “Did you?”

He looks back at Dream and wiggles an eyebrow before he raises it, following the realization that Dream is in on whatever it is Sapnap is talking about.

Every step forward feels as though they are crossing all those twisted, wet ropes that Dream has felt he’s been hanging on to for so long now. Even the look in George’s eyes frightens Dream as they make it to his bedroom door, closed and emitting cool air from the tiny crack underneath it.

Dream nearly thinks of fleeing, of leaving for a few moments, but it's the sound of George's voice that brings him to the surface again.

"This is mine?"

All yours. "Of course."

He grins at Dream, bringing a newfound comfort to Dream's cheeks as his fingers splay over the handle and push on the metal of it. The door opens, and George's skin covers with goosebumps. He leaves the suitcases in the hall for a moment as he steps inside to observe, careful eyes over basic pieces of furniture. Dream wonders what he's thinking, if that smile across his face means anything more than it should.

Dream watches at the door frame with Sapnap. One of them wears a thick smile and the other an impatient straight face.

George goes to the folded sheets first.

"If you don't like those, I will buy you new ones," Dream tells him.

At that moment, George's head bends down to hold them. He brings them to his nose, to his cheek, presses skin to the soft material of baby blue.

"I like them," he says. "They smell so fresh, too."

Dream shrugs. As a moment passes, he swears he hears every step George takes, every breath he inhales and exhales. He keeps his ears open for Elytra just across the way. His heart pounds and thumps and pounds and thumps.

"Okay. Good."

Sapnap motions to the desk, talks to George about how they should get his computer setup. He shows him boxes they haven't opened, and one that they accidentally have. And George laughs when Sapnap jokes about what he saw inside.

Dream feels himself shifting back toward the door, his chest wanting to move toward Elytra.

He's restless.

Parts of him, from the bottom of his trunk and up to the thinnest part of his tongue, want to take George from his new room and place him in his own. He wants to watch his expression change when he meets Elytra, when he realizes how she and Dream share such similar features.

God, it's such a clouded part of his thoughts that Dream wants to—fuck, he just wants George to stop looking at his drawers so Dream can find out if his soft edges are going to turn all hard on him the moment he looks at her.

So your best friend is having a baby, Dream remembers. Congratulations! Don't be an asshole.

"These are—" George looks between the three paper cards in his hands, and for a moment, Dream's face falls. He relaxes in his own skin. "These are cute."

George's eyes are so delicate as he opens Sapnap's card that Dream swears he's never seen such chestnut and coffee together.

"Your daughter has more skill than you do," George says, voice silvery. Dream meets his gaze in a

hurry and looks down at the card, regards the way George's thumb brushes over the doodles on the paper.

From there, Dream falls short of breath. George looks back at the papers and Dream guesses that he's read the note written to the side. It's nothing personal, Dream knows Sapnap has read it too. Despite that, George's face turns into this sweet pout.

"She's got better skill than me at a lot of things," Dream answers.

George grins.

He looks between the two of them and then sets the cards back onto the bed.

"Thank you," he whispers, his head nodding along, "seriously. Thanks."

They stand a moment, the three of them soaking and drinking in each other's presences.

It's a relief, really, when Dream thinks about it. He's spent all of this time stuck against his seat, begging and hoping that this day would come, pleading against his mother's shoulder as he wished for silly things like flying the both of them out. It was years ago, when Dream was still learning that life hardly flowed in the same direction he wanted it to, when he was waking up at ungodly hours of the night to do stupid stuff, and crawling into bed at night with nothing but regret underneath his skin.

But as he lets George into his room, he thinks those old parts of him have finally shown him who he was meant to become.

Even in the past two years, since having Elytra, since he's fallen more times than he ever has before, Dream has understood that every second will still pass, regardless of if he wants it to or not. And he'll take each second, each minute, each hour, and treat them kindly. He'll remember that he can be stronger than time, and that his mind must ease, and that the hands of time will guide him along just fine.

He's suspiciously calm now, as George stands at his bedroom door, as both of their mouths draw taut lines, and as their eyes speak in careful smiles.

Dream has come *this far*. So far.

"I, uh, want you to meet her." Dream's chest rises when he inhales. George notices the skip in his step as they walk into his room, and Dream sheepishly tells him to watch his step over nothing.

"I know you do. I want to meet her as well."

Good. *Good*.

"I didn't see a picture, so I'm curious to know if she's got your nose, or your ears, or anything," George laughs under his breath.

Dream's face falls. He looks between George and narrows his eyes at the rug near the edge of his bed. *Should he apologize?*

He apologizes. In a few words, as he raises his palm to his face, he tells George that he is sorry.

"It's all right, Dream," says George through a smile. "We don't—It's okay, we don't need to get back into any of this right now."

Now?

Are we supposed to get into it later? Dream thinks.

He tries to give the same smile back, but Dream can barely fake one. He nods and moves on, takes himself over to where Elytra is stirring from her sleep in her crib.

When she flips around, Dream notices how rosy her cheek is. She's been asleep on one side of her face for too long, blooming lines across the skin there. Her eyelashes flutter open as Dream sports a shy smile. He's close now, as she likes him to be when she wakes up. But her frown is clear.

"Hi sweetheart," he whispers as he holds her close. Her body rests close to his heart, and she cries just slightly, but her thumb goes back and forth over his chest to comfort herself. "I know, I know, we're all grumpy when we wake up."

George is quiet.

A breath stammers in his throat. Elytra kicks her feet as her face settles between Dream's neck and his shoulder. Dream looks to George as he leans against the wall.

He's not sure what it drew over George's expression. Dream can't read the light that blurs and shines beyond his eyes. Not this time.

George just watches, looks at Dream like he has never seen him before, like it's all new to him. The corners of his mouth are up in a soft, flattering smile, and his eyebrows raise any time Dream moves.

"Can you say hi?" Dream cranes his neck backward as he flattens his hand over the warmth of Elytra's skin.

She grumbles and whines and then cries, all at the same time.

Dream feels defeated.

He wants this to go well. He wants her to smile and look at George the same way he does.

He wants her to hook onto his laughter and the curve of his smile and flip-flop between joy and tears from a belly full of humor. But Dream knows better than this. He knows her well enough to know that she's just tired, waking up in the middle of the afternoon and clinging onto the last few moments of sleep.

George doesn't show disinterest, but he wraps his hands around his own waist and smiles again when Elytra pets the back of Dream's hair.

"She's tired," Dream tries to beg George to,

Stay.

George nods with him. "She's tired."

I can't.

The idea of him leaving makes Dream's body want to twitch with discomfort.

"I should let you—"

“George,” Dream tries to say.

They speak silently to each other. In carefully raised eyebrows as Dream attempts to ask him to stay in the room, and as George insists on giving him space. It’s all vague, and Dream stares at the ground as he feels two heartbeats at his chest.

He can almost feel George’s, too.

“It’s okay,” George says. His hands dig into his pocket. “We’ll have time later for us to meet. You—you go be a dad, Dream.”

Dream can’t understand how George is so smooth over all of this. He’s still wearing a delicate grin on his face while Dream holds Elytra and is just a few seconds short from swallowing a broken cry.

“Okay.”

Then George is gone.

And like the storms that suddenly approach, Dream slumps his shoulders and exhales heavily, all at once. He wobbles on weak legs until he rests on the bed, until he stands Elytra up on her bare feet.

Her eyes are red, tired with a desire to sleep, and Dream has never felt so much love.

He laughs under his breath and presses his nose to her chin, lifts his head up to press a kiss against her skin.

“You’re tired, I know,” he says softly, voice delicate in a way where only she knows. “But I can’t let you sleep too long or else you’ll never sleep tonight, you know?”

She drops onto the bed. Dream chuckles.

“You wanna go swim?”

At that moment, Patches hops onto the bed and whirls around the two of them. Elytra lights up and sends her hand onto her back.

“Kitty,” she mumbles in a frown.

“Gentle,” Dream reminds her as he flattens her messy hair. “You want to swim? With Dris? And Sap?”

Her eyes close for a moment and Dream takes it upon himself to pull her close and lean back on the bed until they are one with the sheets again.

“Okay, five more minutes.”



George looks good underneath the sun.

He's not used to the heat, it seems. But Dream can see his skin from across the pool as his shoulders rise in expectancy. He enters slowly, each inch of his body sinking further and further into the water, and all Dream does is watch with big and playful eyes as George tries to bite back swear words.

Sapnap splashes him, dips under the water before George hurls himself at him. Dream smiles.

He turns away from the others so he can cup water in his hand and splash it against Elytra's legs and where she sits on the ledge.

She doesn't want to come in, she just lounges against the edge in a hat, and these awful sunglasses that Dream swore he thought would look cute on her. *They don't*, but it's not his fault. It's not. The photos online made them look much better.

"You can give her to me for a bit," his mother says from a chair in some shade. "If you want to go play with your friends."

Dream looks up at her with a goofy grin. He laughs.

"Play with my friends?"

"You know what I mean."

Music plays lightly, and Dream watches as his uncle and his father walk in and out of the house with trays of food. The grill is on, and it smells incredible, but Dream can feel his shoulders burning already from the pressure of the sun.

He sort of wishes now it would've been cloudy today, that the sun would've gone easy on them.

Even George, who is dipping his head under the water, has applied sunscreen against the curve of his shoulders almost twice since they've been outside. Sapnap had pinched his fingers and rubbed them against George's ears and said, "*I saw Dream do this to Elytra earlier*," in which George had replied, "*Oh my god*."

It's gentle, but Dream denies his mother's polite request.

Instead, he gets Elytra out of the sun and joins her at the table, presses his lips against a glass of cold water and drinks. The little girl in his lap is impatient and fingers with the glass Dream is drinking from, causing it to spill on the both of them. Dream gasps, grows goosebumps, and clumsily reaches the towel around before just deciding on letting it dry. It's hot, anyway.

"Here," he laughs. "Have some."

His mother's face softens as she looks between her glass and her son and the others in the pool. Drista is yelling with George, a little to him, and then towards Dream's father, but he doesn't give much attention to what goes on.

He just dips his fingers in the last part of his drinking water and presses it to Elytra's warmed cheeks to cool her down.

"You're surely nervous," his mother says over her glass.

Dream scoffs. "Well."

"You should talk with him," she murmurs. "Like, about the things you tell me when you get all."

Her hand motions in a circle. “Like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like *this*.”

Dream slumps.

“It’s fine,” he answers. “It’s. We don’t really tell each other that much.”

Her lip turns downward. “You don’t tell him when you’re upset?”

Dream swallows. He doesn’t know exactly how to take her question, not when it’s coming from her, not when it can be answered in about five different ways. *Of course*, he thinks, of course he tells George when things are bothering him. George is the one he thinks of when he eats something bad and when his phone dies, when his car breaks and when he’s nearly late to an appointment. The first person he’s got to tell for anything.

“Not when I lied to him.”

She hums at this. She nods.

“You’ve got to realize you’ll be hiding more if you don’t talk to him. Both of them.”

Dream grabs a glimpse of George and Sapnap. George is on the ledge now, a towel around his shoulders as his wet hair drips onto his thighs. He wears a smirk as his feet kick out toward Sapnap, who floats on his back, a carefree look on his face.

The sun makes them both look so pleased. Bright. Warm.

But ruining that will ruin Dream.

“Sometimes talking makes things worse,” Dream admits.

His mother pauses for a moment.

“You’re going to be fine.”

Having the quiet reminder is nice, and he knows his mother will not push to tell him what he needs to do. So he exhales and twists his head until he can look at her.

“Thank you.”

Drista, after some convincing, takes Elytra into the pool. And instead of watching the two of them as he usually does, Dream helps his father in getting the rest of the food cooked.

Sapnap and George are still dripping wet when they sit at some chairs, but Dream beams when laughter intertwines through the voices and the music in his backyard. It’s all lovely, and he gets to hear it, gets to stand in the middle of it with placid legs that grow stronger after every breath.

He feels weird when he asks George if he’d like a beer.

And George can tell, because both of their cheeks get this peach sort of glow that flares toward their ears as the sun starts to set. He takes it from Dream’s hands though, and drinks it slowly, and while he does, Dream feels fainter and fainter, burning a comfortable smile onto his mouth.

They talk about sports while eating burgers, all while the sun sets and as bugs come out.

Dream is so used to George's unfamiliarity with conversations of sports that it surprises him as he listens to the few of them speak of the past weekend's game. Dream catches Sapnap's eye, and the smirk on his face says enough for Dream to look down at his feet, smashing stray ants underneath the top of his flip-flops.

He bites his tongue and tries not to laugh.

But the conversation flows, and Dream ends up in a sweatshirt by the time nine rolls around.

His family has gone, all but his mother, who stands with him at the back door as she insists on taking Elytra for the night, for a few hours, however long for Dream and his friends to stream together.

"No," Dream sighs as his palm crowds the side of his head. He can hear—and feel—the knocking of a headache, the squeezing that is bound to wrap around him in just a few long seconds. "You don't need to do that. I can handle it."

He can sense how she tries to deliver as much relief as she can. But Dream is only the smallest light in a big cave. And he doesn't need to move, does not need to explore. His mother rests her hand on his shoulder, insists he take a break soon.

Dream can never deny her.

He agrees. Promises her he will take care of himself.

Dream sees George before he hears him, and he winces at the exposure of his own emotions. He almost drops the act completely, almost makes a joke about the shivering silence and the stubborn reality of what he's just walked into. But Dream supposes George knows what a son's moment with his mother looks like. He can see it on his mouth and in the way George tucks his hand back into the long sleeve of his shirt that he is nervous.

Dream smiles at him and George returns it.

"Sorry," he says, knowing he can't just disappear back into the bedroom. "Just wanted to see if there was anything I could help with as far as cleaning up."

There's something soothing in the way George looks. His hair is just as wet as it was earlier, but this time it's cleaner. He's showered, and Dream has to force himself to swallow so he doesn't think about George standing on the wet floor, his hands going from shampoo bottle to body wash to face wash to whatever he must do in the shower. It's just too *real*, having him in the house. Dream never thought this much about such tiny details when George was back home. And now he's thinking about if George will be comfortable enough in the temperature they keep the air conditioner at.

"Think we got it all, George, but thanks," Dream says.

George nods, but he doesn't leave.

So, Dream asks, "Do you want to stream tonight?"

He doesn't want to be asking. *But he has to.* This is George's home, too. He should be able to do what he wants.

Dream's mother excuses herself, quietly tells Dream to text her if he needs her. Dream knows why. George gives her a polite farewell.

But when it's just the two of them in the kitchen's silence, amongst the path that leads them to the backyard, Dream feels the familiar pain of weakness. It's refreshing, yet so fucking terrible, to know that he gets this way around George.

Every breath that George mutters makes Dream feel as though his lungs are going to puncture. And for so many reasons, Dream hates it.

It doesn't matter that he has only just arrived or that he's still grinding his feet into the right shoes in this house, that he's still learning the door handle on the first floor bathroom only works if you tilt it upward, it still hurts. George steps so carefully around Dream, speaks with the same amount of humor, but holds his breath for two seconds before he even says a word.

George leans against the back of the couch.

There you go, Dream thinks. Do that more often.

Please.

"Stream?" George asks. "I think—"

"Are you uncomfortable, George?" He asks, hastily.

As soon as he speaks, he inhales a deep breath.

"What?" George breathes.

Dream sighs. "Like. Here. Are you, uh, are you okay? In this house, and everything."

George hesitates. In his movements and gaze and breathing. He hesitates to answer, when he looks up at Dream, and when he wobbles the left side of his lips into a smile.

"Will you walk outside with me?"

Dream nearly croaks at him, nearly begs him for an answer right there. He wants to know. But he follows George and sticks his slippery tongue back between his teeth so he can bite on it.

The night sky is bare when they step outside. It's a bright night, moonlight kissing at their cheeks, bugs loud, cars even louder in the distance. Dream wishes they lived closer to the ocean. He thinks the sincerity of peace would be on their side in moments like this.

"Do you know how much today meant to me?" asks George, pulling his sweats up to his knees.

He sits on the ledge and lets his feet hang into the water. The pool light clings in a glow against his face. He grins.

Dream thinks back to the car, when George had asked him if Dream knew how exhausted he had been. He wonders if it's something George has always done—if asking questions like this is his way of telling Dream how he feels.

Maybe he's only noticing it now that they're seeing each other in person.

"I don't."

George kicks water forward. It ripples around him.

Dream joins him, sits next to him until he considers himself able to take a breath. His feet dip in, and he waits.

“I have been waiting for this day,” George whispers, looks over at Dream, between his eyes, “for years. And you and Sapnap spent the entire day feeding me hamburgers, giving me beer, and making sure the sun burnt my skin just a little.”

Dream snickers as he looks fondly at George. “Sorry.”

“It was perfect.”

Good. Oh. God. Good.

Dream looks down at the water again and moves his feet around in circles. His head tilts from side to side as he watches both of their feet draw shapes and patterns underneath.

He wonders if this was always supposed to happen. The two of them hip to hip near his pool, laughing over sunburns and beer. Feelings and uncertainty thrown aside.

George huffs air out of his mouth. “You’re so good, you know?”

The little grin that Dream has plastered on his face freezes and then melts off, ever so slowly. His skin runs cold, and suddenly Dream can no longer move his feet in the water.

“I’m—wait, what?”

“You’re good,” George chuckles softly, delicately, miraculously as he licks the underpart of his lip and sighs. “At this thing you do. This *dad* thing, Dream.”

”George.”

Dream almost feels like he is begging him again.

“You asked me. I’m not uncomfortable, Dream,” George takes a moment and moves his leg out of the water so he can wedge it between their bodies. Dream feels his thigh soaking from the wetness of George’s shin, but he doesn’t care. “I’m not. I don’t really like that I wasn’t there for you, but showing up here, watching you, it—that doesn’t make me uncomfortable. You’ve got to know that.”

All Dream can do is nod.

Good. You’re so good.

“You think I’m good?”

George looks between him and the ground. “I don’t know if it’s just me who notices such tiny details, but watching you out by the pool today, I don’t know. You’re a good dad. Even the way you do things like put sunscreen on Elytra’s ears. I mean, come on, you had Sapnap doing it on me, D.”

Dream’s cheeks go red.

He looks over at George, finds that familiarity in the pure warmth of his eyes.

George shrugs at the look he gives him.

“Dunno,” George says.

He furrows his brows and gnaws at his lip. “Thank you.”

A moment passes.

Dream takes it upon himself to lean back on his palms and extend his throat until he looks up at the sky above him.

“You don’t need to thank me.” George rests his fingers on the edge of Dream’s knee. “Just want you to know two things.”

Dream cranes his head to the side.

“Okay.”

He waits.

George’s first finger goes up.

“I’m proud of you,” he starts, and Dream feels his skin go numb. It’s *already enough*. He doesn’t even need to hear anymore. “And I am already happy here.”

Dream holds his hand out without thinking, and George willingly grabs on before Dream pulls him into a side hug. All tight and warm and close.

“Oh,” George says with his cheek squished to Dream’s body. “And no stream tonight. I’m so fucking tired.”

Chapter End Notes

whew... we are going places, everyone.

im also not sure how many more chapters are going to be THIS long, and I might drop the chapter count, I'm going to work on some planning this weekend and see, but I will probably talk about it on twitter maybe!! i like to get things out as quick as possible, so if it's shorter chapters, not 9k like the past two have been, then I'd prefer that :) maybe closer to 6 or 7 or something !!

anyway, if you enjoyed this chapter, please let me know!! i absolutely love hearing about what u think!!! it's the main reason I have been able to work so quickly on these chapters, and I cannot thank you all enough for the support on this!!

i feel so appreciated, thank u incredibly.

[reese :\)](#)

four

Chapter Summary

It's only been four days since George has been in the house and yet Dream feels as though it's been months.

Chapter Notes

cw underage drinking

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sapnap can make an excellent breakfast.

Eggs and pastries and meats that Dream has to cut up into small pieces for Elytra to eat—with pancakes and roasted potatoes. Sugar and salt and spice and buttery tastes around the table.

He loves doing it, too. Cooking for everyone. Dream admires his patience in the kitchen, how he wakes up at early hours and how he saves enough for when Dream's mother comes over, or when Drista tags along with an appetite and tupperware in her arms, ready to take as much as she can.

Sapnap will sport a sloppy grin on his face when he cooks. He'll get grease on his cheek and his temples when he brushes his hair from his eyes and Dream will stare because he likes to know how much he loves it.

He *wants* Sapnap to love it. All the raw parts of his kitchen; the broken blender in the corner that he hasn't replaced in months, or the crumbs underneath his toaster. He wants Sapnap to love it because it's *his* now. Everything in the kitchen—the half opened spaghetti noodles and the can of tomato soup, the chocolate almond milk that Dream bought for no reason—it's *theirs*.

It's Dream's and Sapnap's and George's.

The fading smell of bacon is conveniently familiar to Dream when he wakes up. It hangs closely in his bedroom, must sneak underneath the door in warm waves because it's close to his nose.

It's always nice, Dream thinks, *waking up like this*.

He's becoming used to it. Living with others, stepping on feet as he moves around, watching his mouth when he speaks. He regards them often, asks for their opinion on almost everything, but he doesn't think they mind. *He'd text it, anyway*. They reply with smiles, an answer, a shrug of their shoulders, a shake of their heads.

It's only been four days since George has been in the house and yet Dream feels as though it's been months.

Long, quiet months of awkward silence and biting his own tongue. But long, quiet months of simplicity.

It's time George needs, Dream reminds himself.

Time has always been the answer.

He needs time to accept and understand and step into this new life Dream has asked him into. So Dream stays quiet, and swims softly underneath the flame where it's warm, and hopes that eventually, at some point, he'll drink in cooler air and things will get easier.

As Dream stretches, the unfamiliarity of flat sheets next to him tears his eyes open. His heart grips toward his throat, hammers at his rib cage like it needs out, like the thrusting in his chest will rip him if he doesn't take a deep breath soon. His eyes blur over as he goes from desk to closet to lump of blankets.

He doesn't find Elytra.

She's *always* beside him, thumbing at his chest when she rises before the sky paints a sunrise, or petting at his hair until Dream wakes. She's always *here*, sleeping soundly on her back or on her stomach, blankets up at her waist or toward her chin.

She loves the crib in his room and the one in her own bedroom, but moments in the same bed together make Dream feel so special.

Dream's bed is big and soft, and he has butterfly sheets and lavender silk ones, and pressing their sleepy bodies to it feels like a reward.

When Elytra is asleep beside him, he knows she is safe.

It's always a reassurance for him, but waking to find her absent, with no recollection of leaving her in her own room, frightens him.

The door is closed, and Dream barely feels the handle under his fingertips before he is swinging it open and listening to the way it hits against the wall.

Maybe it dents it, maybe it digs a hole, scars the paint. Dream doesn't know, and he doesn't stop to look.

He just rushes through the hallway like his eyes are set on one thing. He checks every door while holding his breath and feels his lungs burning while he does so. Hands melt at his side. Teeth saw into his lip. And his stomach knots.

She's in the kitchen.

He finds her there, just moments later, laughing as Sapnap sticks the fork toward her mouth and as she takes pancake pieces between her little teeth.

Heat thickens up Dream's sternum.

He's unsure why his body feels tense. It's all so sudden—the spill in his belly, the rigid lines that form at his shoulders as he leans against the bar.

The look on Sapnap's face is soft, the giggle that fuels through the morning air between them; it's as a morning should be, and even George sits there and eats eggs with simple, tired eyes.

Dream feels his knuckles pressing eagerly into his own hip, feels rough edges meet smooth skin underneath his shirt. It's displeasing.

It's too damn early, and this morning doesn't taste sweet to Dream, it's all bitter. He breathes in through his nose and already regrets the shiver across his spine as his fear takes over.

"Sapnap!" He hurls out, body tightening up as soon as he recognizes how harsh and how cold his voice has become.

The boy at the table turns to Dream, and his smile falters. He blinks like Dream has caught him doing something he shouldn't, like he's being scolded, blamed for something. *It must hurt*, Dream thinks, but he stares through him profusely until he feels as though he's torn a hole through Sapnap, right down the center of his body, like he's ripped him open in front of the entire crowd of the kitchen with just a simple tone of his voice.

He drops his shoulders. He softens his blow. The kitchen goes silent.

Sapnap sits there, looking lost, and Elytra pulls on his hand with easy glee as she reaches for more breakfast.

"Sorry," Dream apologizes. "I just—I, uh, I didn't want you to feel you had to cook for her. Or take care of her this morning."

No one says anything.

Dream's neck itches, and he scratches to rid the awkward feeling stirring up under his skin. George chews slowly with furrowed brows while Elytra tries bugging him for food. Sapnap doesn't look at her, doesn't regard her in the slightest, and Dream feels like he's thrown everyone back about ten steps.

Fuck. His voice cracks as he croaks, "I woke up, and she wasn't there."

He tries to explain himself. He grabs at words from the back of his throat and gives them to Sapnap before anything else can go wrong. Sapnap's face opens with realization, and he eyes Dream's movement as he digs socked feet past the tile.

"No." Sapnap clears his throat and pulls the utensils and the plate back from Elytra. "I'm so sorry. I heard her just behind the door, and I—I just figured I could grab her for you, let you sleep. I'm sorry."

His voice is sincere, crawling toward desperation like he wants Dream to understand him. But Dream already does—*he does*, and he doesn't know how to tell Sapnap that he's afraid he's going to push them away with all of this. And even more so now with the way he's just raised, *or lowered*, his voice over his own fear.

So he nods. He swallows. And he watches Sapnap slip away from the table to head back into the kitchen.

Dream walks to Elytra and stands behind her to ruffle against her messy hair.

"Morning," he whispers as he bends down for a kiss

Her hands are sticky. But Dream doesn't care as she reaches back and presses them up to his ears. He doesn't care as she gets syrup at the edges of his lobes. He chuckles, kisses her cheeks again, and whispers endearing things that get her to smile this early in the morning.

With a turn of his head to George, Dream nods, pushes his thoughts aside just for a moment so he can greet him and ask him how breakfast is.

“Sap’s brilliant in the kitchen,” George tells him.

Dream feels less tense. He smiles. “I know. He’s amazing.”

“He’s made you some.”

Looking down, Dream sighs. His eyes move from the table to the plates to the kitchen, from stove to Sapnap, and when he finds the boy, he swallows. Dream is nervous, he’s murmuring words of encouragement to himself in the back of his mind as he stands, and he even gets a touch at his lower back from George.

It means well, Dream hopes.

So he holds onto it as he finds Sapnap heating food, as he finds him handing him a plate with everything he loves.

Dream holds it close to him before he lets it rest on the counter.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I shouldn’t have spoken to you that way. What you did—it’s—that’s fine, Sapnap. I just.”

But Sapnap has this look in his eyes, and Dream thinks he’d melt if he weren’t so harshly caught up in his actions.

“Dream,” he laughs lightly. He’s nervous, too.

Dream reaches behind him and pinches scrambled eggs between his fingers. He chews slowly to waste time, to ease the lump he feels in his throat.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I should’ve approached you differently. Sapnap, I—I can’t even think of what to say right now. Why aren’t you.”

A pause fills their air, and Dream swallows more egg and watches Sapnap grab a carton of orange juice in the refrigerator.

“Why am I not mad? Upset with you?” He asks like he knows.

Sapnap laughs like he is mad. But his eyes blink such naked emotion. Dream cannot tell.

Dream hates this conversation. He wants to spit it out—he wants to bury it somewhere far away; he wants to sit at his computer and play games and hear Sapnap laugh at his ear, all silly and sweet and cute and gentle until he gets that little blush on his cheekbones. He wants that so bad. So, so bad.

He nods. *Why aren’t you livid?*

He hands Dream a glass of orange juice, encouraging him to sip from it. Dream does.

“I haven’t been here too long, man, but I already picked up on so much about you,” Sapnap says as he leans against the opposite side of the counter. “You shower in the middle of the night, when Elytra is asleep, which means—well, which means you aren’t sleeping, but... it means you go right to bed with wet hair. You tiptoe around our rooms because you think we’ll wake if you even sniffle around us.”

Sapnap turns around and grabs a piece of sausage from the plate. He bites it and chuckles. “Did you know—Did you know I caught you cutting George’s potatoes last night?”

Dream cackles. He didn't think anyone had seen him.

"I just," Dream flushes. "I wanted to make everyone dinner, and I was rushing handing out the plates—"

"Uh, huh?"

"And—*idiot*—I handed you your plate, and then realized I was cutting up George's food, not Elytra's."

Sapnap snickers. He looks over Dream's smile and his mouth and then sighs.

"You're a young guy with a little girl. A very, very little girl who you want to protect, Dream. I get it. You don't sleep sometimes, you do life a pretty specific way. I get it. Or," he pauses. "I'm trying to get it."

Relief eases its way through Dream's blood, down the backs of his knees. He cranes his neck toward the kitchen table, looks between the archway to find George holding the fork out toward Elytra. When she denies the pancake, he tries with the egg. Dream grins and lets his shoulders shrink in on himself.

Sapnap watches too, carefully, and in a way that has him looking between Dream and the table.

"He's trying to get it too, you know."

Dream chokes on his own breath, holds it in before he can prove it. "I know."

"Remember what I told you?" He asks Dream. "Let us into your family, dude. We're happy to be here, I promise you. No matter how awkward things get sometimes. Yeah?"

Dream nods at him, licks his lips and churns up another apology.

But Sapnap speaks again.

"Tell me when I overstep." Sapnap wipes off his smile and looks down into Dream's beating heart. "Please. Tell me what not to do, or *what* to do—but, just, don't be a dick about it?"

Dream rolls his eyes. His hand touches Sapnap's sunny cheek, and that familiar tenderness fills his chest.

"I promise."

Sapnap bumps his hip. "'Kay, go eat."

It's better when he sits at the table and when he relaxes his shoulders into the chair, or when he watches Elytra's hands go directly into her food and then into her hair, into his hair. It's frustrating, and he presses his palms to his eyes as he groans softly to himself, but everyone laughs because it's *better*.

It's smoother.

And when he cleans Elytra up in his bathroom, he tells her about how messes like that aren't okay. He brushes her hair and looks at her in the mirror and pulls wet and brushed brunette hair into little pigtails on the top of her head.

He's always been so soft-spoken with her, teaching her through experiences and through careful

conversations and a lot of eye-contact.

But today it has irritated her.

She's more restless as she stirs against him, as she plucks things from the cups next to the sink and as she tosses them back down onto the counter and onto the ground.

Dream stills her, holds her back to his chest and lets her rest her head on his shoulder as he crouches down.

"Hey, are you listening to daddy?" He asks her tenderly when her whining tips louder. "You hear me?"

He opens his mouth to say something else, to offer her more gentle words about what's right and what's wrong, but she leans her forehead against his neck and he frowns when she tears up.

His hand flattens over the skin on her belly to calm her, but when he does, he feels heat. He furrows a brow and turns his head to the side until his cheek meets hers. *Warm.*

Elytra goes quiet.

She doesn't answer him, but she pats over his back when he stands.

"Do you want to play?" He asks, treads lightly, knowing that right now she's feeling irritable.

He leans against the bathroom door that leads toward the hallway to keep himself steady. He takes one breath, then two, then three, until his arms tighten around his daughter. She snuffles and his stomach turns.

As he opens the bathroom door, cool air pats his cheeks.

George passes him with a raised eyebrow and a glass of water. He smiles, waves at the two of them.

Dream wishes he could take the time to say something nice. He wishes he could ask George how the unpacking is going, or if he's been getting enough sleep.

He's not. Dream can see it in his eyes and on his skin.

"Hey," Dream says suddenly. "Does Elytra—uh, does she feel warm to you?"

A look of confusion passes over George's face. Dream doesn't want to be a dick— *"Just, don't be a dick about it, yeah?"*

But fuck if George doesn't hurry.

"Warm?"

Elytra's cheek rests on Dream's shoulder sweetly. He's reminded of times in the grocery store, or her first time at Disney, when his arms nearly broke off. But he did it. He held her for as long as he had needed to, because she wanted him. Heart to heart, blood to blood, skin to skin.

"Yeah." Dream takes a deep breath. "I think she might be running a fever. She's really warm, and she's restless all of a sudden and I—I don't know, her cheeks weren't red or anything, but—maybe I should call my mom."

George follows Dream's eyes as he looks toward the wall.

He's got this frown on his lips, this look of concern, and Dream wants him to urge him to do something. He wants George to nod his head, or feel Elytra's back or her belly, her ears, her cheeks. But all George does is breathe a little heavier as he sets his glass of water on the nearby table in the hall.

"Oh," he murmurs. "You think she's sick?"

No shit.

Dream chews on his lip as he walks with George back into his bedroom.

He walks carefully, slowly, stepping foot by foot, inch by inch, just in case Elytra has already fallen asleep against him. She's stopped rubbing over his back and has stopped with the tiny pats to his shoulder.

But lying her down on the bed only makes him fear more. Her cheeks are in fact rosy and her eyelids flutter back to a close when she rubs her nose toward the blanket.

"Should I get medicine?" George whispers. "Do you have any?"

Dream disregards him as he sits on the edge of the bed. He uses the thermometer he's got and gets confirmation of a fever.

"Fuck." He grits his teeth as he whispers.

They make eye contact, and Dream apologizes with only a look in his eyes.

"Sorry." He ends up saying it, too.

George steps forwards and rests his palm on the top of Dream's head.

For a moment, Dream goes slightly limp. He relaxes under the touch, short nails against his hair.

Dream would consider it one of the first times George has *really* touched him. Fingers that he's seen through a computer now against the top of his skull in an unwinding manner. It's peaceful. Dream doesn't understand why he's doing it, but underneath the contraction of his ribs, the squeezing of his worry, he *understands*.

Mornings should be sweet, should taste like sugar, but his tongue has gone all bitter again, and now he looks up at George like he's clueless. Clueless and afraid.

"I'm being an asshole," Dream mutters under his breath. "Been one all morning."

"You're feeling sorry for yourself."

Dream scoffs. "Now you're being an asshole."

George's mouth turns upwards, and he pulls his fingers from Dream's head.

"I'm not," he chuckles as he crosses the room to rest his back against the wall.

It's cold. Dream has the air low today, and now that he knows Elytra is running a fever, he wants to turn it even lower. He wants to wrap her in blankets, research how to take care of someone when they've got a fever—how to take care of a toddler when they've got a fever, because the last time

she was sick was when she was less than six months old.

He breathes in.

He sighs, exhales through his nose and turns his neck to the stillness out the window.

And George watches. Dream wonders if he has his eyes locked on his jaw, where Dream's got scrapes from Elytra's long nails he's been needing to trim. He wonders if George sees beyond his minor flaws on his skin or the shivers in his breath.

He wonders.

When their eyes meet, Dream finds himself more tranquil.

Looking at George brings a silly grin to his face, despite all the bunched up worry knotting inside of him. George eases the burn in the center of his chest, brings him from tense muscles to relaxed joints and soft bones.

"Sorry," Dream whispers, ends up saying through the air. *Please understand.* "I don't want her to be sick."

George nods. "I know. What can I do?"

"Medicine," Dream says low as he feels over his knee. "Would you mind checking in the cabinet next to the microwave? Should be some children's Tylenol. If there's not, would you shoot me a text? I'm gonna call my mom."

When George leaves the room, Dream's body stiffens.

Is this how he's supposed to feel? Is fear supposed to wrap around his ankles like this?

He looks at Elytra and pushes his tongue to his bottom set of teeth to prevent himself from croaking. He lifts his chin.

He inhales, this time from the roots in his feet, taking the smothering fear and trembling thoughts with him as he exhales again.

The phone rings against his ear, and he nearly hangs up when he thinks about his mother's schedule, about what she's doing or if he's bugging her during her day.

His knee bounces as he stares at the pigtails on Elytra's head. His gut is uneasy and his tongue nearly bleeds when he hears his mother's voice glide down the line.

She says hello and laughs when Dream doesn't greet her back.

It's all playful, the way she talks to him.

Dream can only croak as he shoves his nose into the crevasse of his elbow. He's still looking up at the ceiling as his heel hits the ground again and again and again. He sobs into his own skin, wets silk with his tears, presses bone into more bone until he shudders upon inhalation.

"Tell me what happened, baby," she whispers to him. "Don't scare me, Clay, please."

He groans as he lifts his head. She's scared. He doesn't mean to scare her.

Be brave, be brave, be brave.

"Hold on," he says lowly. "It's okay. It's fine. One sec."

She doesn't speak. Instead, she listens. And Dream keeps his eyes shut until the loudness in his ears disappears—all the pounding, all the quivering.

"I think Elytra's sick," he tells her. "And I'm scared. It's been so long since she's been sick, and I don't want to do it wrong."

"Do what wrong?" She asks. "Did you cause her to get sick?"

"Well, no."

"You have medicine in the cabinets," she says. *Do I?*

He checks his phone to find his messages with George.

there's some! George's messages sit there from three minutes ago. **want me to leave it on the table outside your door? ill do that... its there**

None of the throbbing in his head exactly stops. The spinning. The turning. It's still there, but he's at least relieved to know that he will not have to ask George or Sapnap or his mother to run by the store to grab something that'll ease the fever in his daughter.

"Is she asleep?" His mother asks.

"Yes, it's all barely started."

"You need to make sure she's drinking lots."

"Yeah, that's what it says online," Dream sighs. "She was restless earlier. But she ate fine this morning. Nick made her breakfast. I snapped at him—It—it's been a bad morning."

"Don't read too much into things you're seeing online," says his mother in a careful voice. "Ask me if you need more help. But it's fine. Use a thermometer. Have her get rest and drink as much as you can have her drink."

"How much is too much?"

A hum leaves her mouth. "You'll know."

"Right, but if she's sick, is she going to get dehydrated faster? With the fever?"

He can already picture the look on her face, eyes dull and mouth drawn into a neutral line.

The end of his lip turns red as he bites on it. But he listens when his mother talks. She tells him about how stubborn he was as a child, how he'd fight her on medicine, on sleep, but how he'd want his parents close whenever his body spiked a fever. He hears about long nights, about stress and worried parents. It brings a sense of security to know that he's not alone. How she, too, used to worry when he was young and sick.

She reassures him, whispers words of encouragement until he nods to himself. She even reminds him of the others in the house, how he has support, people to go to, people to call. Doctors.

He pulls the blanket from Elytra's waist and lets air hit her bare back. A sad smile rises onto his face when he leans over her, when he presses his fingers against her neck to feel how warm she is.

When they hang up, Dream's shoulders and his neck and his head all loll forward.

Worry still clings to his mind, strong and with a heavy grip, but Dream lets it. Because proceeding is difficult. So fucking difficult.

But he has to, and he will.



After many, many hours of heartbreaking tears and nervous attempts to sleep, Dream breaks.

He isn't sure what he'd call sleep at this point. Maybe the few minutes he gets in when Elytra drinks under Sapnap's eye, or when she lies on her back and falls asleep after a bath.

They're on day two, nearly three, and Dream knows she's getting better—*he knows*, but she's so goddamn fussy and sad and irritated that he hardly knows what to do.

Just a few hours ago, as midnight turned to one, he had held her against his chest with heavy, tired eyes and with a sippy cup in his hand. George and Sapnap were there, in the living room, looking at him with these awful and sympathetic eyes, and Dream kept swallowing down every word he wanted to whimper at them.

"Let me." Sapnap had opened Dream's fist to take the cup. *"Juice? Yeah?"*

George kept smoothing his hand over Elytra's back to soothe her, and Dream's eyes were closing and closing as he leaned back into the couch. He had barely heard George's voice through the sleep that tugged at him.

"Think you're supposed to add some water, Sap."

Dream's eyes expanded as he had blinked himself awake.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. *"Dilute it, please."*

Sapnap nodded at him, gave him a sweet smile. And all Dream had felt was *guilt*.

It's been tough, but now that they've gotten a little sleep, now that it's close to five in the morning, now that Dream has woken to more cries and more heat, he feels scared.

He tries to tell himself that she's better, that she just wants to be awake, but her skin is so warm from tears, and she clings to Dream relentlessly.

Thick, wet tears pearl down his face when he holds his daughter close in bed.

Their noses touch as their tears meet each other.

Feverish skin and icy cold hands.

Dream has surpassed the point of trying to avoid crying in front of his daughter and has gone all in, has stepped right into the darkest hole he could find. His feet are numb from the ice he stands in, the water he's locked in, and it all hurts.

He rests her against his chest, begs shamefully under his breath for it to just, “*stop.*”

Her pain, her tears.

A sad sound of a scream slices through the room, and Dream cups her cheeks as he sits up in bed. He wipes the dewiness across her face and lets his own tears melt into the mattress.

"I know," he whispers. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart, I know. I'm so sorry, I'm sorry."

Aching eyes answer him, and she mouths at his neck, cries into his shirt when he tries to soothe her.

Her hiccupping wails turn slower as he calms her down, as his fingers spread over her spine. He knows he should move her hair back, but she won't sit still enough for him to do it, and for that reason, she's got sweaty strands stuck against her forehead and her neck, and he feels awful.

Five in the morning isn't kind. It's hard, aggressively hard on both of them, and Dream knows that everyone else in the house is struggling to get sleep from the sounds of Elytra's cries.

Dream reaches toward his bedside table when he sees his phone light up.

He turns it over.

Sleep, he begs whoever is texting him.

Maybe Sapnap or George or his mother. Maybe Drista with an iMessage game. He pleads for them to sleep, to get the rest they deserve at such an early hour.

It takes a while, but eventually Elytra cries herself to sleep, brief hiccups, and tracked tears staining down her face. It's certainly painful, and Dream's mouth trembles as he pets over her hair. But he is thankful, and he hopes sleep will hold her until she can have more medicine.

He carries her to her crib and lies her on her back, brushes over her matted hair as he frowns.

Dream wipes his tears and leaves her to rest.

Moments later, when he holds his phone in the palm of his hand, he finds a message from Karl.

gonna be streaming tomorrow night, let me know if you wanna join? :) i asked george and sap to join too

Dream's eyes flutter shut. He chuckles.

Course! He writes back. I'll let you know tomorrow afternoon. Might be busy, I will try my best :)

He makes a small sound in the back of his throat as he leaves the bedroom and as he tiptoes toward the kitchen.

It's so early, he thinks.

But he wants rest and food and warmth. He settles with a protein bar and bites the top part of it between his teeth.

When he rests his cheek against the cold granite, he croaks out a quiet whimper. He thinks of George and Sapnap, who have yet to stream since they've moved in. He thinks of Elytra, with

painfully hot cheeks and a sick, healing body. He thinks of himself, the way he's been in the same pair of sweats since Elytra first showed signs of a fever.

He wants his friends to be happy. To enjoy this life here. And he doesn't know how many times he has to think about it, or—or say it for himself to make it happen, or for himself to believe it will happen. But it all feels wrong. This order he's doing things in.

It seemed so much easier from afar, when he'd dip into streams and mute every once in a while to check on his daughter. When he'd sit on calls with Sapnap for hours, or call George when his mom wanted to watch Elytra.

No fucking way can he stream tomorrow.

But they can. And they should. It's their home, too.

He texts his mom next.

Mind if Elytra and I spend tomorrow evening with you? Need to get out of the house for a bit.

He takes another bite of his protein bar. His tears openly slip between his lips.



The muscles in Dream's jaw feel taut by the time he wakes up.

They feel glued to the mattress, sticky from dried tears, hot from whatever position he's been sleeping in, for however long he's been sleeping.

It's sunny out. Dream knows at least that much.

Any time he shifts his feet, a tinge of pain curls around his spine, but the sun is spreading across his sheets so gingerly that he swears his eyes burn a lot less just by looking at it.

Dream takes a breath and gazes across the quietness of his room.

Elytra is still sleeping, but she's turned onto the opposite side to where Dream saw her last. The curtains are spread open, and Dream knows that someone's been in here to do that, because it surely wasn't him.

With a turn of his head, he finds George, a crooked and helpless grin on his face.

Dream doesn't sit up.

He takes a few moments, lets sleep tug him back under as he opens and closes his eyes before he finally looks over George's face.

George sits by Dream's hip.

It's quiet. The air that passes, it's quiet. And Dream loves it. He wants to be selfish about it because Elytra is asleep, and George is here, and it's *quiet*.

Dream's face deepens into his bundle of pillows and blankets at the head of his bed. He keeps his

body flat to his sheets and warm against where it's comfortable. He's on his stomach, but his neck tilts over so he can see his friend.

He peeks an eye out from under the blanket that is tucked near his chin.

He studies George while George studies him.

"What time is it?" Dream breaks their silence to ask.

George's head tilts as he whispers, "you look a mess."

Dream frowns into his arm. He's thankful his mouth is pressing firmly against his own skin, thankful for the hiddenness of his emotion. George can see his eyebrow furrow, but he lets it happen.

Dream's eyes close.

"Well," he says. Not bitter, but weak.

George stares.

"It's close to noon."

"Okay. Wow."

George chuckles. "It's good that you two got some rest."

"Did you?" He asks him, voice lower.

A pause comes.

Dream knows George is trying to read between the laziness in his gaze, the beats of concern underneath his breaths.

He doesn't really want him to. It's more like... Dream just wants George to answer him, to admit that he had a rough night.

"Course I did," George tells him. "Why wouldn't I?"

Dream tries not to roll his eyes or grunt or scoff. He just brings the tip of his tongue between his teeth before he pokes it out to wet his lips.

"Because Elytra probably woke half the neighborhood with her crying at five in the morning," he says.

George smiles. He looks down at the mattress and then up into Dream's eyes.

"She's sick!" George defends her as he rolls his eyes playfully. "What would you do if you felt so awful like she does?"

Dream groans softly and sinks further toward his pillows. His eyes are still burning, his chest still hurts, and especially now that they're talking under their breaths about his daughter like this—still such a subject that makes his breath hitch.

Their laughter spins when their eyes meet again, and Dream quiets down in fear of waking Elytra.

But George doesn't move from his spot. He just looks, trails his eyes from Dream's eyes to his cheeks to his bitten lips.

It's a little terrifying, Dream admits. Being underneath George's gaze like this.

"You've been crying," George says.

Dream flutters his eyes to a close.

"It was so scary, George." He tightens his jaw. "I never want to see her in pain. Ever. I felt—I don't know. It's like, I don't know what I could've done better now that I think about it. But at that moment I just wanted her to stop crying because I knew she was feeling awful."

George's brow furrows as he listens.

"I didn't want to cry," Dream says, voice heavy. "But I felt helpless. And then. She was looking at me like she needed help, and I couldn't do anything. I didn't know what to do."

They both exhale, and George nods his head as though he understands.

George's head cranes toward Elytra's crib, and he smiles as his shoulders slouch.

"How do you feel now?" He asks. "Now that she's asleep and supposedly feeling a lot better?"

Dream gives him a weak smile.

"Feel like I need to make sure she's still okay. Feel like I overreacted. I don't know."

Teeth show when George grins at him, all tender and careful under the glow of the bedroom.

Dream isn't really used to seeing George up close like this, but he supposes life in a new home will do this to you.

"She's okay," George reassures him. "I think she's broken her fever. But you—" he pokes his finger into Dream's chest, "need to be reminded that you're not overreacting. You're okay."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"No."

George makes a soft sound with his mouth. He hands Dream a mug of tea. "Made you this."

It's warm around his fingers, nice and relieving as he squeezes it.

"You?"

George snickers. "Sapnap did."

"Thought so." Dream sits up finally.

His head feels floaty, dizzy with lack of sleep, heavy with the amount of tears and emotion having spilled from it just hours ago.

"Did you get Karl's text?" Dream asks George.

He looks at him over the top of the mug, waits for George's response. But when the pause gets too long, Dream speaks up again.

"You should join his stream," Dream says, swallowing down his tea.

George purses his lips.

"I'm not gonna—*Dream*," he whispers. "Elytra is sick. It's just a stream. I'll tell him we're working on something tonight."

A guarded glare reflects across George's eyes when Dream looks up at him. He wants to scoff at him, or, fuck; he wants to do something that'll get George to shrug his shoulders and shove his tongue into his cheek so he can get annoyed and then give up.

"I told him I might be busy," Dream explains. "I'm gonna take her to my mom's later. You and Sapnap should stream with him while I'm gone."

George's shoulders rise to his ears, and Dream supposes that maybe those words are the ones that have George angry.

"No."

"You can't tell me no."

Regardless of the dangerous movement of their conversation, George stays. His breathing gets heavier and Dream looks at him with a tight jaw, but George *stays*.

"You shouldn't need to leave," George mutters, face souring as he shifts in his seat.

Dream scoots over. "You haven't streamed since you've been here."

"It can wait."

"For what?" Dream raises his voice, lowering it a second later in a plea. "*For what?*"

"Until she's better," George whispers harshly at him. "It can wait."

Dream draws backward, sits against his headboard as he murmurs a sigh. He feels like he's losing his bearings as he looks back to George, who only wears the remains of a smile, a limp expression with weak, tired lips.

Now that it's morning, Dream isn't stuck to his room.

He knows he can leave. He knows he can walk out of here and get some fresh air, away from George, away from the walls that have closed in on him all goddamn night. But he doesn't move.

George may drain his blood for this, may take him by the throat and get underneath his skin, but Dream won't hold his tongue about it.

He is desperate for George to understand. Desperate for him to be okay here.

"I'm going to go," Dream tells him. "Take the opportunity, George."

Dream shouldn't feel so dispirited as he sits on the balcony of his parent's house. But as he looks from the pond to the sway of the trees above him, he realizes that life doesn't really beat in patterns he wants it to.

And it's fair. But, it's frustrating.

Even the air is muggy, and it sticks to his lungs as he breathes in.

He leans back in the rocking chair, listens to the creaky sounds of it as he stares at the peeling paint on the wood in front of him.

Part of him wishes he'd spend more time at this house.

Part of him wishes he'd work on *their maintenance*, be a good son like he used to think about as the moon flooded in on him in his old bedroom.

His head tilts toward the door when it opens. His father walks out with a glass of water.

"Hey, kid," he says as he sits. "You should drink some."

He takes it from his hands, presses the glass of water to his lips. "Thanks."

"Your little one is asleep," he adds. "Wanted to play with your sister, but she ended up watching a movie and falling asleep with her."

Dream swoons. He'll thank Drista later for lulling Elytra to bed.

"Your mom wants you to drink some Vitamin-C packet shit stuff, but I wasn't gonna stir that in for you," his dad says.

Dream laughs at him as he relaxes into the cushions. He turns his head and gives his father a sincere look.

He's always shrugged things off humorously. Like when Dream ran his car into the tree right outside of the neighborhood when he was teaching him how to drive. When he dented the side of his truck. He had given him a shrug, a downward turn of his lips and a throw of his hand.

"*Eh, I'll get someone to check it out,*" he had told Dream, wiping Dream's tears with the bottom of his filthy shirt. "*No big deal.*"

It was a big deal. The truck never worked again.

But Dream bought him a new one after Elytra's first birthday, and he had wiped his dad's tears with the inside of his own hoodie.

"*I'm not even crying,*" is what he told Dream.

Dream remembers laughing with him. "*Oh, you're not?*"

"*Nope. Give me the damn keys.*"

He loves his father more than anything. Every interaction they've had has always been a lot of back-and-forth humor and lighthearted bickering. Fights and not talking for weeks out of frustration. Doubt and guilt, and then making up with long talks on back porches and drives out to

the beach, just the two of them. Dream has always been thankful for it. He's always been good to him.

"How're your friends liking your house?" He asks.

Dream stills a moment. "They like it."

"Liking the pool I spent money on?"

Dream rolls his eyes, turns his head as he takes a sip of his water.

"You're so annoying, you only did that because you wanted the project."

"Of course I did," his dad says. "Are they liking it?"

"We only really swam that first night when George came in," Dream admits. "I don't know."

"So you're saying I need to get someone to install a grotto?"

Dream laughs. "No!"

For a minute, Dream says nothing. He allows the weather and his dad to calm him. It's nice to relax like this. To take deep breaths of the humidity and swallow it down, just the both of them in the backyard.

His dad makes a sound to get his attention.

"Don't let a bad night scare you, Clay."

"I know." *He doesn't.*

He speaks up before the conversation even starts.

"Being a dad is hard," his father says. "You know how many times I had to pretend I knew what was going on, *just* so your mom wouldn't get too scared?"

There's a light that brightens in his dad's eyes, and Dream tries to grip onto it, tries to hold and take some for his own before it fades off.

"How many times?" He asks.

"So many times," his dad answers. "When you would get sick, when you were just a baby, I had to convince your mom that things were okay, when really you had me scared shitless."

A smile tickles up Dream's cheek. "Really?"

"Oh, are you kidding?" He asks. "I'll get you back for that one day."

Dream pulls his knees to his chest as he rests his cheek against bone. His legs tire, but he sinks further in his seat and lets fatigue drip into him.

His father observes him, like he's trying to figure out what to say next.

"I don't have anyone to be strong for like that," Dream admits, foolishly and weakly. He tries not to tremble as the familiar scald of tears burn behind his eyes.

His father clears his throat and clicks his tongue and sets down his own glass to give Dream his full

attention.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he says, dreadfully low. “You’re brave for Elytra. For yourself, of course. But, *for her*. She only looks at you when she’s hurt and when she is happy. When she’s pleased and when she’s sad. And every—all the other things she feels, she shares those things with you. *Just you*. Maybe your mom, and the rest of us sometimes, but you’re the most important person in her life, and she trusts that you’re going to be there for her.”

Dream doesn’t realize that when he blinks, tears slip horizontally down his face from the way he’s laying. They stain his kneecap.

Sorry George, he thinks. I’m crying again.

“I don’t want to cry in front of her,” Dream says.

“She doesn’t think any less of you.”

Dream frowns. “How do you know?”

“Because I’m a father.”

Dream buries his face between his knees.

Mosquitos bite at his feet, at his shins, and he struggles for a moment as he tries not to dip past the sharp intakes of breaths that’ll lead him near sobs while he folds in on himself. He breathes out through his nose and he opens his mouth to yawn against his leg.

It hurts as he sheds air from his body.

“You don’t think any less of me, right?” His dad’s voice whispers lightly before he sparks a laugh. “Unless you do, because then I’m going to have to change my entire speech here.”

Dream sticks his arm out to shove him.

“Course I don’t,” he answers weakly, hiding more of his emotion behind his voice.

They look at each other. And Dream whispers his gentle words of appreciation toward him

“Go home,” he says to Dream. “Let Elytra stay the rest of the night. She’s already asleep, don’t wake her. Go get a little drunk with your friends. Have a beer. Go for a drive or, for fuck’s sake man, get some sleep.”

Dream sputters when he hears the swear. It sounds so simple from him, but he’s not used to it and Dream’s cheeks go red as he wipes tears and as he sits up straighter with a laugh.



He’s cold by the time he gets home.

Rain soaks past his shoelaces and seeps into his socks, sits cold in his shoes in a gross, unflattering kind of way. He peels them off and tosses them out the back door to dry, hoping that the sun will reach them by morning.

It's quiet in the house. There's no dread that is bathing at his neck, no disturbed sounds of nerves filling up the space in his mind. He doesn't feel ill or dull as he opens the refrigerator, but he hesitates with fingers glued to the handles because it's the silence that is smoothing over him—silence that is turning all of his roughness to softer, shameful innocence in the evening.

He blinks profusely at the lack of food, pulls out his phone to make a note about getting groceries. He sends a text to George and Sapnap while he's at it—just to let them know he's home.

Instead of giving in to the hollow feeling in his body that lugs him toward his room, toward his bed, Dream waits.

He waits.

And soon, Sapnap arrives in the kitchen first with wet hair that matches Dream's. He's in a pair of boxers and wears an endearing smile. He's got George's merch hoodie on, too, and for that, Dream's mouth quirks up at him.

"That's cute," he points.

Sapnap shrugs as he shakes his wet hair on Dream, soaking him more than the rain already has. "George and I were taking photos in each other's hoodies like this."

"In boxers?"

Sapnap looks at him with a raised eyebrow. "Yeah, in boxers."

For a moment—well, for a couple of moments Dream comes to a standstill. He thinks about it. He fucking thinks about it, because George comes down the stairs in his hoodie. Not Sapnap's hoodie, but his. Smile and long and big sleeves bunched around his fists as George goes to grip and pull it up.

Dream tangles up his thoughts and blinks hard before he clears his throat.

"How was the stream?" He asks them.

Sapnap is a sudden light while George grins through him. *Dream is glad.* He's so glad before they even start speaking.

"It was good, yeah," George hums as he laughs and parts his lips to say something.

Dream tries to listen as George goes on, but all he can do is stare at the way Dream's hoodie wraps around his body. He's got sweatpants on, and Dream is thankful because otherwise he'd be staring at his thighs and he'd be trying not to choke on whatever would pool underneath his tongue.

Hopelessness, maybe. *Curiosity*. Hopeless curiosity.

"—let me grab it!" George says as he jumps up the stairs. The sweatshirt flies up with him as he takes a couple of stairs at a time.

Dream turns to Sapnap.

"What's he grabbing?"

Sapnap bursts out a single laugh. "My merch hoodie, you horny fuck."

"Sapnap!" Dream scolds as he goes forward to grab at the strings that hang down from his sweatshirt. Sapnap reaches up to pinch the dripping strands of Dream's hair. He yanks, Dream

huffs. “Why’s he getting that?”

“Because we wanted to take photos together. Me in George’s hoodie. Him in yours. You in mine.”

“Oh,” Dream whispers.

Sapnap catches the look on Dream’s face, and he mutters under his breath like he knows.

Dream kicks at his ankle.

“Shut up,” Dream says.

George returns a moment later with Sapnap’s hoodie and something else Dream can’t see, but he throws it all toward Dream as he bends over and heaves a breath.

“Got you a towel as well,” he says as he points to Dream’s hair. “And socks. The rain’s probably cold.”

Oh. The grin barely touches Dream’s face, but when it does, it hurts. He nods.

Dream takes it and starts dragging the towel across his cheekbones and the creases at his shoulders, up at his forehead and on his eyelashes. It’s all wet on his face, and he shivers when he peels his shirt from his body to pull the warmth of the hoodie over his skin.

“Do you need new pants?” George asks him, his words quiet but his eyes loud.

Dream looks down toward his knees. He finds mosquito bites and leg hair brushed down from how soaked the rain had made him. But his shorts aren’t wet.

He shakes his head at George, offers him a brief twitch of his nose and a playful grin.

“I’ll survive,” he says.

“Look at us,” Sapnap breathes. “Take a picture with me, right now. Take your pants off.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up.”

They take photos together, Sapnap’s cheek pressed against Dream’s chest and George against Dream’s shoulder. They laugh like they’re already drunk, like the pleasure in their chests has burst to the surface.

And when Dream proposes the idea of drinking, he spills Smirnoff down his front and onto George’s sweatpants and their laughs drain to the same pitch, meet at the same level that it makes his head hurt.

He doesn’t drink too much. He’s hardly got any drinks out in the refrigerator outside, most of them just leftover from when everyone stuck around for the pool party. There’s some beer, and Dream thinks about sipping on it while he watches George and Sapnap eye the bottle of tequila, but he doesn’t want to mix too much of what already sits in his stomach.

There’s half a bottle of a green apple Smirnoff sitting with no food and light anxiety in his stomach, and he chews on his lip as he grits his jaw against the couch.

His hoodie is warm. The music is gentle, and he stares at the teacups in the room’s corner as he thinks about Elytra—how happy he is that she’s feeling better and how thankful he is that she is resting and that she’s safe.

“Dream!” He hears Sapnap call from the bar. “Look.”

He turns his head to look at them, finds the skin between Sapnap’s pointer and his thumb near George’s mouth. It’s wet already and there’s salt, and George’s tongue—his pink and wet tongue—sticks out to lick over the skin on Sapnap’s hand while Sapnap’s other hand cradles the nape of George’s neck.

George takes the shot.

Dream watches.

He smirks. His stomach lights low as his lips part for a breath.

And Sapnap cheers as George pulls a face upon pressing his lips into the lime.

Watching the two of them speeds up Dream’s heart into a soft, well-deserved flutter. He chuckles under his breath, gives George a thumbs up as he shouts, “hot!” across the room.

His voice is all honey and his stomach cools when the music lowers and when George and Sapnap join him on the couch a few minutes later, after more shots and more sugar and more bites into the toast Dream told them to make.

George spreads Nutella over his.

“I feel it,” George looks at Dream with liquid-brown and trusting eyes. He points to his chest and drags a finger from his throat to his belly. “Here. And here.”

Dream chuckles. He’s so fucking tired. He’s hardly tipsy, a little nauseous, but he’s so damn warm as he sits in the living room. Too much light crushes in on his headache, makes it all a bit worse. He says nothing, because it doesn’t matter right now. He loves this moment.

“Yeah?” He asks George as he watches chocolate smear over the salt still near his lips.

“M’drunk. A bit.”

“A bit, Georgie, yeah.”

Sapnap plops onto the chair opposite of them and runs his fingers through his hair.

“I’m so happy to be living here, dude.”

Dream’s stomach tightens. “Are you gonna get all deep on me?”

Sapnap looks down at what must be the stains over the hoodie Dream has on. Dream looks down, too, and he squints his eyes with a careful smile.

Sapnap shakes his head and gives him a raise of his middle finger, muttering something about how he’s just glad things are falling into place.

It makes Dream think. About Sapnap. About how he’s right. About how many things are falling into place. Between random drinking in their kitchen and tired nights and learning how to deal with streaming and swimming between his fear and worry and bravery.

Dream wants to be brave for his friends, too.

It’s much quieter now, and Dream wonders if they’ll fall asleep like this. Maybe even in the bright

lights underneath the living room with the sounds of George eating toast.

Dream looks over at George, knees all bunched up and hoodie covering his legs.

“Happy?” Dream asks—doesn’t know why, but he asks.

George takes a moment and holds his chocolate piece of toast to Dream, who wraps his hand around George’s wrist before he takes a bite.

Crammed between them, little giggles spill.

“Happy,” says George.



Dream cleans up the kitchen when Sapnap falls asleep on the couch. George lazily tags along, but his limbs are all weak and he bumps into the counter four times before Dream has to place his hands on George’s hips to keep him from falling.

“I’m not even—” George laughs as Dream shushes him. “Not even that drunk anymore, I’m just tired!”

They clean up drying limes and wipe the counters because George has learned how much Dream hates sleeping with a dirty kitchen.

And when they leave a blanket over Sapnap’s sleeping body, they creep toward their bedrooms.

“Would you mind if I hung out in your room?” George asks Dream.

And Dream *wants* to say yes.

He wants to. But he wants to lean his cheek against his pillow and fall asleep. He doesn’t want to drip into conversations or flatten himself against George’s curiosity as they talk about nonsense. *Any other time*, he wants to tell him, *I’d love to*.

“I’m so tired, George,” he whispers as his hand fiddles with his door. *Sorry*.

George looks so understanding as he leans against the opposite wall. He looks so tired, too, through Dream’s eyes. He nods his head and licks at his lips.

“Me too,” George says as he shrugs. “You’re right. We should get some sleep.”

But neither of them move.

Dream’s feet don’t want to. He feels sheepish, probably looks it too as he takes in air through his nose.

“Yeah.”

George blinks slow. “Okay.”

“Night, George.”

As George lifts his hand, Dream sees more salt and more hazelnut spread against his fingertips. It makes his eyes soften.

“Goodnight, D,” he says as he walks down the hall, dragging his feet as he hums. “Sleep—Get lots of sleep, like, a lot.”

Dream follows him quietly until he’s sure George gets into his room safely.

He double checks the locks, gives Sapnap another blanket, and then allows himself to rest.

Chapter End Notes

this was a... tough one.

but let me know what you think!! :) please leave kudos/a comment if you'd like! thank you all incredibly for your support, it means so much to me.

there is lots to come for everyone in this house.

[reese :\)](#)

five

Chapter Summary

"Yeah," George hums. "Your daddy *is* sleeping. We shouldn't wake him."

Elytra's fist lifts and then drops harder onto Dream's chest again, nearly drawing a laugh out of Dream when George goes, "*oh, let's—let's not do that.*"

Chapter Notes

sorry for any errors! please enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream enjoys being outside.

Truly. Honestly.

When the wind picks up and when he dips underneath the shade as fat raindrops tickle his forearms, he likes it. When he watches children yelp for their parents and run after each other as their shoes skid down slides and as they slip on playground stairs through the rain, he likes it.

Minus the crick he gets in his neck when his reaction is to reach out and grab the first child who goes barreling over torn rubber and onto the concrete.

Sure. Yeah.

He likes it.

The park is fun.

Swearing is a no-go, so Dream bites the tip of his tongue and grabs the kid by his wrist because *fuck*, it's all he can do with Elytra in his arms.

He manages, and luckily Drista is standing next to him and gives an assisting pull to the little boy as she brings him back to his feet.

"You all right?" Dream bends down to his level and wipes the mud from his knees.

But the child in front of him says nothing. His hands cover in more dirt and soak with more rain as he flutters fingers over the white material of his shirt, and for a moment Dream thinks about the laundry and the stains and he chuckles under his breath.

Then he's gone.

Little feet down the sidewalk and a reunion with a man Dream supposes must be his father. He gives Dream a wave, a considerate and formal sort of appreciation for helping his son, and Dream

returns it.

He guesses that must be the end of that.

“You okay?” Drista asks him a moment later as she gestures toward his leg.

Dream looks down to his knee and finds blots of crimson through dirt and gravel and rain. It doesn’t hurt, just hints of stinging that make him want to squirm a bit.

He must’ve skidded across a rock earlier or dug his knee into the concrete and dragged it nastily.

“Damn weather,” Dream mutters to her in a frustrated voice. He runs his dirt covered fingers through Elytra’s hair. “*Oh*—oh, shit. Sorry.”

Elytra is hardly paying any attention, but her cold palm slaps over her mouth and then Dream’s at the recognition of Drista’s exaggerated gasp.

It’s playful, but Elytra talks about the rain and something scary about the thunder and Dream has to promise her they’re safe as his arms tighten around her.

Drista bends down to Dream’s knee, and she uses her jacket to wipe blood and dirt from his skin. “Would you stop swearing? There’re kids! There’s *your* kid.”

A hiss drawls from his mouth when she touches the wound. She smears it with the rough edges of her windbreaker and then laughs about how terrible of a job it has done. But he thanks her and kicks his foot out as he watches the jacket tuck back underneath her arm.

“So much for a good day at the park,” Drista says as they sit on the dry bench.

She’s right. But Dream doesn’t like turning these bad weather days into nothing. So, he gives her a shrug and bends forward to watch the clouds move and form into one another, grey and dark and gross.

“I say we wait,” he says. “What’s the radar say?”

“Rain.”

“Funny. Good one.”

Drista laughs before she pulls out her phone to check.

On Dream’s lap, Elytra scoots until she stands, and Dream holds her hands as she steps forward onto the concrete platform they wait under. Her shoes aren’t wet, but Dream still looks around for puddles near them and points, puts his cheek next to hers and tells her to be careful and to not get wet.

She, *of course*, goes to the water, glues herself to it like she’s some sort of magnet. And Dream slouches and watches with attentive eyes. He should let her have fun when the weather has flipped on them like this, pretty white clouds swirling into thick grey ones.

He’s got an extra pair of socks in the car, anyway.

“Stay close, E,” he calls to her.

It’s not that he’s hidden with the way he speaks toward her, or even with the full usage of her name, but it’s easier to shorten it in public, it’s safer.

Dream's never been publicly seen or heard, and it's for this exact reason that he's glad he's always been a faceless streamer. To take his daughter to the park, to sit with his sister and laugh about the weather and nudge her when she digs her toes into his or when she teases him about how caught up in his own head he gets.

People leave with frustrated children. The parents are relieved, and Dream sort of gets it, he does, because they want to go home and the kids want to play, but he wishes they'd put on a better face in a time like bad weather where it brings rough moods and aching joints.

The weather ends up clearing the longer they wait and blue skies peek out from the darkness above them. Drizzling rain weeps down and more discouraged families settle on leaving, but Dream stays. There's not an extra pair of socks in his car for him, but he'll manage. If he deals with blisters later on in the week, he'll figure it out.

Because it's worth it. Staying. When the sun radiates a glow over the wet metal on the playground and the dark rubber. The humidity is a shame, but he's spent so many of these years dealing with this that it's become familiar, and Dream sweats underneath it like it's his second job. He sheds his and Elytra's jackets in order to cool down.

George calls while they wait for the droplets to clear up, and Drista pulls Elytra toward the swings to give Dream a few minutes alone.

He tells George about the weather and the scrape on his leg and the random kid he saved who didn't even *fucking* thank him—and George laughs. He bursts out laughing in this tired, low voice and with this grit that Dream is becoming familiarized with.

"Well, not all heroes get recognized and thanked, you know," George says.

Dream scoffs playfully at him.

He sees more people arriving and wonders if they should leave soon, if it will wear Elytra out, the way the weather's been changing.

"Have you been up yet?"

George hums, "'s only ten."

"I know, but I needed you to check something for me."

"Oh, then what can I do for you, dearest Dream?" George grunts. Dream supposes he must have sat up in bed, dragged the sheets and the comforter off of his body. "What could I possibly have the pleasure of checking for you this *fucking* early in the morning?"

"Jesus Christ, George," Dream simply widens his eyes. "That mouth, what's with it?"

They both pause a moment.

"You know what I dreamt about?" George asks tiredly.

Dream hears a door handle, and he thinks *he's doing it again*. That thing where he asks Dream rather than just telling him.

"What'd you dream about?"

Chuckling, George clears his throat. A breath lightens over the line. "It was so—*wait*, what did you

want me to check, by the way?”

“Oh,” he says. “Uh, the outside freezer. Could you tell me if there’s any more frozen pizzas? We’re gonna run by the store after this.”

“Sure.”

Dream says nothing, doesn’t *know* what to say as he pushes the top of his shoe into a puddle of water.

“Oh, right,” George says. “I had a dream we got a dog.”

“A *dog*?” Dream asks incredulously before he laughs, chest filling with air like he’s been punched, almost.

George clicks his tongue in agreement. A door creaks and Dream hears the familiar tune of the beeping recede down the line.

“A dog,” George repeats. “We should get one. Like, a puppy or something.”

For a moment, Dream smiles stupidly. He thinks about a dog, *a puppy*, in their house. Paws on the kitchen floor, more mud than he’s already come across today. Tongue across his cheek, tail whipping back and forth, whacking down cups, and Elytra’s hands petting over fur like she does with Patches. *Cute*. Not ideal, but cute. And George, who enjoys dogs and animals and the responsibility of caring for things.

“George,” Dream chuckles under his breath. “I’ve got. I have a baby, George. I can’t get a puppy right now.”

The way his voice plays out could be seen as spent, and Dream hopes George’s feet on the garage floor don’t become cold as he thinks about dogs and life and family and the future.

He lets his thoughts sway back to golden fur in the living room. On the bed. On his lap. Barking to wake Elytra. *Terrible*, Dream thinks.

His belly turns, and his lip juts out in a pout. He thinks of that little smile dogs give when their mouths fall open, the way their eyes gloss over and the way it looks so gentle, or how they cuddle up and lie close.

“You want one?” Dream asks before he can stop himself.

“*What?*” George’s whispering voice sounds too loud for a simple phone call. Dream almost pulls the device away to double check he’s not on the other side of his ear. “I said. I—I said there weren’t any more pizzas out here, Dream.”

“Oh.”

“What are you on about?” George asks.

“The puppy. Do you really want to get one?” Dream’s voice climbs as he sits back on the bench.

He watches Drista for a moment. Elytra sits on her lap as they go down the slide she’s dried. Dream smiles at them.

“It was just a dream I had,” George says softly. “A dog is a lot of work, you know.”

“You’re telling me? You’re the one who just said you wanted one!”

George sputters.

“It’d be a full house,” he reminds Dream in a careful tone. “It was just a dream. We don’t need a dog.”

“But you’d like one,” Dream confirms.

Well, now George is too quiet, and Dream is teetering on the edge of getting him one and telling him how bad of an idea it would be. He breathes through his nose in a deep, careless way, like he’s trying to inhale all of his thoughts and freely hand them off to George.

George laughs tenderly, kisses his teeth so loud that Dream hears it all the way from the park.

“I mean, who wouldn’t?” He asks like he is begging Dream to understand.

“I’ll get you a dog.”

George whimpers a little, groans and then laughs again and again. “My god, Dream. Shut up.”

This time, when Dream mimics his laughter, he keeps it low and leans forward to press his elbows to his knees. His knuckles tense over the material of his shorts and his eyes come to a close. It’s quiet through the phone and loud outside as the sun gleams and as people return to the playground. Dream wonders if they’ve been in their cars this entire time, if feet of children have been kicking the backs of seats as they eagerly await the rain to end.

“How about one day?” Dream compromises like they’re actually considering this.

“One day,” George repeats, voice stronger.

It’s fond, the way they’re speaking to each other, it’s a lot more fond than this past week has been, and Dream allows himself to savor the entire moment.

“Okay.”

When they hang up, Drista gives him a single look. It’s more *fondness*, Dream realizes when he understands that she’s overheard some of the conversation. And Elytra holds wet rocks in her hands and tells Dream about how they’re *pretty* and how they need to *keep them* and *show Sapnap* and *build a big ship*, and Dream’s not sure what’s got her saying these things or why she’s wanting to build rocket ships out of the things in her arms, but he lets her take some of them back and forth from the bench to the car.

He ends up finding a happy medium with her when he tells her how they can’t take all the rocks home. She sits impatiently and straightens her spine as she points to the grass and all the other rocks, and Dream just knows she has this enormous picture in her head about what she needs to build once she has all these rocks back home.

“We should leave some of these here for the other kids to play with, right?” He asks.

She looks up at him with this cocked eyebrow, like she’s giving him a minute to rethink what he’s said. “No.”

Drista chokes out a laugh from where he slouches against the car.

“No?” Dream looks down at Elytra, laughter on the tip of his tongue.

Her hands go up and Dream can't help but smile sincerely at the way she looks so *serious* while swinging her arms around.

"No," she explains again. "Cause—A rock—it's there."

"Right."

She leads him to where the rest of the rocks are, right underneath a bush and a few lilies and weeds.

"And. At home."

"We have these at home?" He asks for confirmation.

She frustratingly stands up like she's on a mission, and Dream leans back to watch. Drista's phone is out and Dream assumes she's got it zoomed in on Elytra as she rushes from plants to rocks to dirt. She loves capturing brief moments like this for him, with Elytra's hands slapping her own cheeks as she tries to brush hair out of her eyes.

She gives him a pretty rock, distracts the both of them for a moment as she leans against his side.

"The kids and they have rocks—have lots!"

Dream loops an arm around her as he pulls her in. He takes her palm and uses a few fingers to clean dirt from it. They flip the rock around together to observe the breaks inside of it.

"Uh, huh? You," he says like he understands. "You wanna take these home because the other kids have their own rocks they can take?"

She gives him this long and drawn out, "yeah!"

And then a furrow of her eyebrows as she collects a few more.

"There's a lot, huh?" He smiles.

"Yeah!"

He gives in. He lets her take a few of the dirt covered rocks to the car.

A gentle chuckle to his right startles him when he goes to pull his phone out. His head turns all the way around and when his eyes settle on where the laughter has come from, he blinks.

"She's cute," says a young woman with a delicate look. "She talks to you well. Like she has the most creative mind."

Dream smiles sweetly at that. "She does," he tells her. "Always—Always wanting to talk and build and make something. Coloring's big, she likes it, but just, *anything*. She loves creating."

He looks to Elytra, who walks from Drista, back to him, and then back to Drista with the few rocks in her hands. She drops them, then bends down and hands them to Drista to help her.

Dream notices then that the woman next to him also has a child with her. She points out toward the boy who stomps across puddles in boots that look twice his size. *It's cute*. Dream chuckles as he listens to the noises he emits. Lots of grunts and crashes.

"That's my son," she sighs. "I think he's somewhere in space fighting dragons."

Dream looks at her. “Dragons in space? Pretty cool.”

“Kids, you know?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

It’s quiet for a moment. Dream isn’t sure if this is a conversation that has already faded, if it’s another one that just comes and goes like the few other parents he comes across in parks. But it feels comfortable, the way they’re both close to the bench and sweltering underneath the humid, hot weather, watching children and their creativity.

Drista looks to him, and Dream almost steps forward, but she jabs her elbow toward the car to tell him she’ll wait, and he widens his eyes.

He clears his throat and turns back to the woman next to him.

“How old’s your son?” He asks after a moment, narrowing his eyes on the lazy plop Elytra gives against the ground.

Dream’s head tilts Elytra’s way when he catches her eyes. When she pouts at him, his arms open, and she comes to curl up against his chest.

“Close to four,” the woman answers before she looks at Elytra with careful, soft eyes. “And your little girl?”

“She’s two, right around the middle,” Dream grins.

Dream talks with her about behavior and emotions and more creativity, and he laughs when Elytra’s eyebrows draw in. She watches so intently and she knows—and he *knows* she knows, and it makes him feel a lot more genuine about moments like these because she pays such careful attention to the way he talks.

It takes Dream a moment or two before he realizes he’s never really *had* a conversation like this. Talking about kids with someone else who has experience.

Dream has had conversations of lashed out, quick-fitted words thrown at his father about how he’s doing terrible. Regretful, weak whispers against his mother’s shoulder, hoping to get better. But never this. This is just laughter over the way their children spill milk over bowls when they want to be independent and little things he’s sure he hasn’t spoken to his parents about.

His cheeks dust pink as his laughter simmers.

“You’re a single dad, I assume?” She asks before her face pinches. “Or, I don’t want to assume, that’s a little—*sorry*. I should have asked.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” he says easily. “Yeah. I am. It’s just her and I. And my parents. I’ve got some friends who support me well, and my sister,” he points toward the car, “who you saw a moment ago.”

She turns her neck around; her smile widening across her face.

Before George and Sapnap, just a couple weeks prior, he would’ve walked away, found a reason to escape. But now he sits, and he talks like he’s building up this confidence that he’s never felt before.

In a few minutes, he finds out that she's also a single parent, and Dream makes a few jokes about it to lighten their air. Young twenty-something year olds with children. He doesn't know what she's been through and she doesn't know what kinds of rough nights he's had and what heavy tears have been ripped from his chest, but the humor has to come out, and they both let it.

"Some days I wish he could be here," she says absentmindedly as her hands fall onto her lap. Dream follows her gaze until he watches her son, still hopping from puddle to puddle. "Doesn't matter how much sh—*crap* we went through. Sometimes I just wish he'd come be a family with us. My mom helps keep my head on straight about it all, I think."

Dream knows what she means. God, he gets it; he *fucking* gets it.

He knows who she's talking about, where her emotions are draining from.

"Thank god for moms, right?" He laughs quietly before they make quick eye contact. Looking back toward her son, Dream takes a breath. "He'll be so thankful he's got a good mom, too."

She regards him, slouches in her posture to display a sweet smile. "Thank you. That is very kind of you."

He checks his wrist, pretending there is a watch.

"Well, it is 'be nice to a stranger day.'"

"I'm so glad you finally noticed," she says instantly.

It's peaceful when silence meets them again.

"I won't keep you. I know she's tired, but if you'd like to stay in contact, maybe we can meet sometime," the woman says. "I can give you my number?"

Nervousness wraps down his spine. He swallows. A thick, uncomfortable, and forced smile scratches onto his face as he looks at her. Lip curling further down, he sighs. His bones ease into the bench he sits on.



"Of course!" Sappnap spits as he tugs on the ends of his hair. "Because none of your fuckin' safety matters, man!"

He's pushing Dream with as much bitterness as he can manage in the leverage of his voice. Tough, low courage practically hurls out of him as his tongue curls over each word, and Dream tries not to feel as guilty as he looks, but it's bad. It's as bad as it seems while their feet sink into the carpet of the kitchen.

He wishes Sappnap wouldn't have started such a howl in their house, because now Dream is swallowing the wrong intent.

Minutes dissolve like butter and by now, groceries scatter over the bar and countertops and kitchen table and the ice cream is melting as they waste their time bickering about this conversation—harsh words and sharp teeth biting into wounds that already exist.

George holds Elytra, and Dream gives him pleading eyes. Wishful, hopeful eyes, but neither of them knows what it means.

“That’s not what—” Dream takes a breath as he stares at the ice cream bag. He ends up putting it in the freezer before it melts and drips all on the outside. “Sapnap, I didn’t tell her who I was! I just gave her my number, and I didn’t give out any personal information. I put a ‘C.’”

Sapnap scoffs as his slanted, downwards frown plummets more.

“Oh, because that’s not difficult to figure out after a while,” he mutters. “You don’t think it’s easy to figure you out by voice? What about once she starts asking questions? About your kid? You wanna start telling her about your life story, too?”

Dream taps his foot against the ground, pulls it from where it’s stuck.

“I think you need to take a breath, Sapnap,” Dream shoots back at him as he leans his hip into the counter.

From the corner of his eye, he watches George leave the living room.

He’s grateful, but he stiffens at the thought of him and Elytra anxiously disappearing. And more concerningly, he thinks of George and his thoughts about the situation because maybe he wants to scold Dream, too. But instead, he’s taking the responsibility of carrying Elytra to a new bedroom.

He hopes the television will distract Elytra enough—she had fallen asleep in the car after dropping Drista off, so Dream supposes maybe one touch to the bed will do enough.

In front of him, Sapnap gives Dream a shattering and hopeless look.

“I’m looking out for you,” he whispers faintly, lapping his tongue over his lips a few times, face blowing redder and redder the longer he looks at Dream.

“I don’t need that!” Dream cries. “Not like this! You don’t—There’s so much going on, Sapnap, and I know you want to help, but this is one of those things that’s too hard to explain. *I’m sorry*. She’s—She’s a parent, a single parent,” he fiddles with the end of his shirt, mouth trembling hopelessly as he tries to find his words. “She—I thought maybe she could understand in—in a way ___”

“In a way I can’t? In a way George and I couldn’t?” Sapnap asks conspicuously. “*Right*.” he clicks his tongue and tenses the shaking knobs of his knuckles. “Is that why you didn’t tell me for two years, Dream?”

“Sapnap,” Dream tries to warn.

“No!” He urges angrily, *painfully*. “You don’t tell your friends for two years but you’ll meet up with a stranger and risk everyone’s safety just because you think she can... what, *relate*?”

Dream stands appalled. Parts of the room descend into unbreathable silence, and other parts turn to shadowed darkness. Under his feet, the world shakes and rattles and breaks. Dream doesn’t cry, doesn’t scoff or spit or fuel more fire to the man in front of him. He nods his head slowly, like it’s all expected.

Like Sapnap was bound to break like this before his few weeks in Dream’s home.

New mattresses under his back, new voices in his ear, new pots and pans to play with, new water

pressure to deal with. It's all new, and perhaps it's too much.

Dream can see the way the skin of Sapnap's jaw tightens against his face in impatience. He steps back to take in all of Sapnap's form. Shaky feet on the tiled floor, those worried knuckles now clutching against the cabinet like he's unsure of the way he has spoken.

Dream wants to remember, wants to say, "*don't be a dick about it,*" and "*we're learning,*" because *aren't we, Sapnap?*

But he knows this comes from a place far under Sapnap's heart, buried deep where worry plays games and where fear hides away, where anger raids, and where hopelessness coddles him.

So he nods.

And he chuckles bitterly.

Dream laughs as his eyes bore like dull knives across Sapnap's dreadful expression. In his chest burns a hysteria of pure fire, and he's sure his face looks all red and weak and tense. But the thing is, Sapnap seems much worse. Tight expression and eyes that pinch harder than Dream thinks he's ever seen before.

"Fuck you," Dream says blankly.

And suddenly, Sapnap is excusing himself and leaving the house, getting into his car with irritation and weak rage all quivering inside of him. Dream watches him with a heavy chest as he backs out.

Dream holds his phone hard in his hand as he desperately tries not to text him.

He lets him get the air he needs to and treads back toward the hallway of his room with lagging legs, and a tired, unsatisfied body that *hurts*.

He's not sure where George even is, but his feet lead him past tightening walls until he stands in front of his cracked-open bedroom door. Dream stops for a moment to listen for any conversation or any sounds of Elytra's gentle yawns or giggles. But he hears nothing. No YouTube videos. No snores. Nothing.

Dream's head pokes through the door, hand holding tight against the edges as he opens it to prevent creaking.

George looks up at him, half slouched with his elbow perched next to Elytra on his bed. His knees are in the air and his feet are flat on Dream's comforter, off-white socks on even whiter, smooth material. A sad smile curves over George's lips and he nods down to a sleeping Elytra with a raised eyebrow.

"Look, Ely. It's the asshole," George whispers.

Dream gives him a look, face beating a light red.

"George," he huffs and pulls his body until he can sit on the opposite side of Elytra. The bed dips. "Don't swear in front of her."

"Like you hadn't," George says humorously to lighten the air. He looks over at Dream and then squints at him. "You alright?"

"Not really," Dream admits honestly, fingers stretching to pull the blanket further over Elytra's

legs. “Don’t think Sap is. He’s left. Going for a drive, I guess.”

George says nothing and rather nods as his hand touches over the threads in front of him. There’s a simplicity through the flow of cold in their air, and Dream follows the way he messes with the top of the blankets, fingers just casually laying over them, hands going back and forth in a smooth motion. George doesn’t notice, but Dream doesn’t mean for him to. He just matches George’s silence instead.

“*Ely*?” Dream asks curiously, turning his head toward George’s blinking eyes.

Next to him, George stiffens and draws his lip between his teeth.

Dream is too close for him to avoid looking, so he *looks*. His eyes meet George’s mouth before he abruptly ends up glancing away. George, again, doesn’t notice, but he sighs, gnaws a little harder on his *damn* lip as he hums through gentle laughter.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I think with my pronunciation of her name, I put more emphasis on the letter *E*, and earlier I had just *said it* and I guess—I dunno. Stuck. It stuck. Is it fine?”

Dream sees the apprehension in the pinched eyebrows George wears and the way his voice creeps with transparency. It makes him grin. *Ely*. Dream thinks he could make it work. He already calls her *E* most days, and adding —*lie* to her nickname would be easy.

He smiles, nods, sends George a haphazard wink, before he whispers, “I love it.”

Dream’s pride aches as he lies on his back. Thoughts of his conversation with Sapnap come back to him.

It’s silent for fifteen minutes. And he’s glad it is, because he’d rather George not say anything. He’d rather he not try to *fix* what they broke underneath their roof. Although, he’s almost certain George has texted Sapnap to check in on him, and for that, once again, Dream is grateful.

It’s another thing George does. He takes care of everyone like Dream does. Just in different ways. Different avenues.

George hums next to him, holds his phone toward Dream to show him a few funny tweets and video ideas, giggles like things are normal, and Dream forces a smile in order to tell himself that—well, things *should be* normal.

Because this is what he wants.

George lying close to Elytra, chuckling over something ridiculous, showing Dream what they should work on next, taking these moments to drown in sheets while the month of May scoots toward June. This is how Dream pictured it. He just wishes everyone would understand him better.

He wishes he would’ve told them everything the moment it all happened. Maybe then this all wouldn’t be so fucked.

His throat closes up. He swallows hard, and George notices.

“Talk to me?” George asks, breath fainter and lower, close to some surface Dream wants to stay far away from.

It reminds him of the night Dream first spoke to him about Elytra, when he sounded distant.

“Maybe I fucked up,” he whispers, rolling his eyes when he catches George’s playfully shocked face over the swear. “I’m serious. About getting her number. Maybe I shouldn’t have. But—I just. I kept thinking about someone else who might be struggling, or—or hurting?”

George looks at Dream. An unstable, careful expression, like a void that he attempts to close.

It’s unfair, the scraping inside of his gut when he tries to open his mouth to speak, when nothing comes out. He closes his mouth again. George says nothing and waits for Dream, presses fingers over Elytra’s back in patterns to continue to soothe her as she sleeps.

Dream clears his throat. “George, if I tell you something, will you promise not to get mad?”

“No,” George says quickly.

“What?” Dream asks like he’s expecting a different answer.

George blinks. “Dream, I can’t promise that. *I’m sorry.*”

“Oh.” *After everything*, Dream thinks, *yeah, it makes sense.*

I won’t make you mad purposely, Dream wants to tell him.

But the way George brushes past the sentimental mask on Dream’s face—it’s gratifying. Dream helplessly falls into the palms George has open for him, regardless of whether he says he might get mad at him.

Dream finds his eyes. “I know,” he adds a moment later. “I understand, yeah.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t say what you need to,” George says swiftly as his body delivers a force into the mattress.

“No, of course. Yeah, I know.”

George watches him.

And as Dream relaxes the muscles in his face, he lies flat on his back to stare up at the ceiling. He can picture where rain had drizzled onto the roof hours ago, bringing a pitter-patter of sounds. He wonders if when they’d get a dog, if it would fear the rain like he once had as a child.

“*Dream*,” George hums softly and evenly from beside him. “Go on.”

When knuckles bruise together from how hard he squeezes, Dream stops to take a breath, and when the hard smashing of his ankles hitting one another gets too rough, he takes another.

“I’ve been thinking about trying to contact Elytra’s mother,” he says and then regrets every word out of his mouth because his whole body goes cold like fitful rain has begun inside his room.

He wants to share his honesty. He needs to.

George’s silence is unholy, buzzing and breaking at Dream’s bones. Warily, his shoulders shift until he’s facing Dream. All of him.

Dream shuts his eyes.

And he gets the worst guttural feeling that when he opens them, George will be disappointed in his confession of words. He’ll have this look of untouched rage that he’ll pound into Dream until he

gets it.

But as eyelashes flutter open, when slow blinks turn to larger ones and when his blurry vision settles on George, he doesn't get any of it. George's lip curves downward, and his cheek squishes against the pillow, but his expression doesn't falter.

"Why?" He whispers.

Dream stares at him in silence.

"I don't know," he roughly admits, arm slinging over his belly to rest his hand against his navel. He rubs back and forth to soothe himself, for the stability of feeling okay as his heart hammers against his neck. "I don't—know."

He knows. He does.

I do know, George.

It's honesty he spills.

And George gives him time to talk.

"I don't like being alone," Dream begins as he tucks his arms behind his head. He has to bend pillows around his elbow in order for George to look at the side of his face. "And I know it's so completely fucked of me to think these thoughts but—I just keep thinking, *what if*. What if she wants to come back? What if she wants to parent with me? What if she realized she made a mistake and wants to be in Elytra's life? What if, what if, *what if*?"

George leans up a little higher in bed and presses the bridge of his nose to the tip of Dream's elbow, and Dream, although speaking with a tight chest, gasps quietly at the touch.

"I'm not gonna cry," Dream tells him.

Their eyes meet.

"It's okay if you want to," George shrugs as his nose brushes back and forth over Dream's arm.

Dream looks away.

"I just—when I spoke with that woman in the park, she was mentioning her ex, how sometimes she wished he'd be there, regardless of what they'd gone through. And it made me think I wasn't alone in those sorts of thoughts."

George whispers, "you're not," and then rests his chin against the tip of Dream's elbow.

Parts of Dream wish he could get even closer.

"I'm glad you could get her number," George whispers. "She sounds lovely to talk to."

Dream snickers. "Sapnap's not happy about it."

"Sapnap is—he's just thinking about—I don't know. He's being selfish."

"Is he though?" Dream asks.

George lifts his head in question.

“He’s coming from a place of hurt, and I feel like you should, too,” Dream says.

“And I do, Dream. You know I do,” George openly admits. “We were dropped right into this, but Sapnap is, believe it or not, being selfish here. Make friends, Dream. Make friends with other single parents. But—but I don’t want you to have these thoughts of wanting to contact Elytra’s mother just because someone you know is thinking of their past, too. You have us, Dream, to care and to love her as much as you want us to. But we only know as much as you’ve shown us.”

Dream can feel George’s breath against his arm. Warm, roughly huffing out onto his skin.

“You have your parents, your friends, your sister. Pushing yourself into contacting her mother, *Dream*,” George whispers against his arm and hesitates as if his next words are chancy. “She made her decision, she—”

“I know.”

“You do?” George almost sounds like he’s pleading.

“I promise I do.”

George’s hand hovers over Elytra, but he doesn’t touch her in fear of waking her.

“Dream, you’ve made such a beautiful little girl. I’m sure these years have been tough, but you move forward now. *It’s you and Ely.*”

George leaves a light kiss against Dream’s elbow before he presses the bridge of his nose up against the skin again.

“Yes,” he says softly, hand desperate to grip something.

Somewhere between it, he falls asleep.



Dream stirs.

It feels like five minutes have passed since George had kissed his cold skin, since Dream tucked his feet underneath the covers and let sleep carry him away, since he listened to the sound of the door signaling its opening. Only five minutes since he last checked the app on his phone to ensure he set the alarms, now that Sapnap was inside again.

As he tries to yawn, Dream hears it—the slight hiccup of a whine, then a laugh, all seemingly at a distance away.

Then there's George's voice.

"Shh," he whispers. "We have to be quiet, now."

As Dream notes the situation, he keeps even more still. His eyes stay closed as he recognizes the touch of everything against him—Elytra's fist pressing to his chest, heavy as her knuckles drag up to his shoulder.

"Daddy sleep," she says, but not in a way where she's calling him.

"Yeah," George hums. "Your daddy *is* sleeping. We shouldn't wake him."

Her fist lifts and then drops back harder onto Dream's chest again, nearly drawing a laugh out of Dream when George goes, "*oh, let's—let's not do that.*"

"We have to be gentle," George murmurs a second later in a voice Dream barely recognizes. "Like this, see?"

Then Dream feels Elytra's hand against his chest again, this time with her palm flatter against him. "Gentle."

George must show her, because her touch is much more careful.

Elytra hums curiously as Dream hears them talk to each other. His consciousness goes in and out as he lies there, and he wishes desperately that he could just wake up and join them in the conversation they're exploring through. But more of him wants to listen to the sweet-tongued talk they take part in at this time of the morning.

Dream isn't even sure what time it is, he just knows fatigue sits strongly on his chest, along with the hand of his daughter.

"—heartbeat," Dream comes to and hears George say. "Like this: *thump thump, thump thump, thump thump*. Do you feel it?"

Elytra uses her pointer finger and taps with that same pattern, and George breathes out, "good, yeah. And you have one, too."

There's a pause.

"Georgie?" She asks next, and this time, Dream can't help the little smile that clings to his lips.

He's not sure if they see him, or if they're looking elsewhere. His eyes haven't opened since they've started speaking, but he plays off his smile with squinted eyes as he rubs his face toward the pillow in front of him. His head cranes to the side and he cracks one eye open to just get a peek, and when he opens them, he sees Elytra up on her knees sitting between George and him, George with messy hair and tired eyes, all a low glow spreading through the darkness of the room.

"And daddy?" She asks.

"Yeah," George says softly. "If you lay your head here, on your daddy's chest, you can listen to his heart. Want to try? Want to go back to sleep?"

She dismisses his words and seems to reject him with an uncertain sound. *Bad choice, George*, Dream wants to laugh. *Shouldn't mention sleep like that.*

"Okay. All right, how about you just listen? Let's listen."

Then Dream feels Elytra's cheek against his chest, and like a familiar embrace, he cannot help himself—he lifts his hand and pets over her hair, over her cheek, as she whispers out sounds of, "*bump bump, bump bump.*"

A sigh flows from George's mouth as soon as Elytra has fallen back asleep, and when Dream opens his eyes, he meets George through slipped tension and the quietness of an early morning.

When their eyes meet, Dream smiles gently at him, like it's their own intimate moment of a quiet bed and tangled sheets. And George just looks between Dream's eyes and then down to his cheek and his chest where Elytra lies, the pressure of his blinking falling harder the more tired he gets. Dream wonders if he's thinking about them or if his mind is empty, or if he wants to go back to his own room.

Looking at him—it's so simple for Dream to reach forward and cup the side of George's cheek, for him to thumb underneath George's eye as a silent appreciation.

George's eyes close and then open as he fights sleep, and Dream shakes his head from side to side as he encourages him to give in.

"Thank you," Dream mouths to him.

If Dream feels George's fingers clasp over his wrist at the last moment, he doesn't react. He only slips further into the river of sleep that cries for him.



It's terribly awkward when they stream the next evening.

Unlike Dream's usual steaming setup, he's got about five other things to deal with—and it all makes him want to bury his head into his hands before they even go live.

For one, they're streaming in Sapnap's room tonight and he is doing a facecam with George in the room, introducing the entirety of their meet up. Dream is off in the corner, dressed in socks and sweatpants and a plain white shirt as he sits on Sapnap's roughly made bed.

It's not technically able to be seen on camera, and Dream is sort of glad he didn't make it because he can slip his legs underneath the covers for security and warmth.

To be fair, they have little planned for the stream.

They've got Minecraft up, a warm can of coke sitting on Sapnap's desk, *fucking* pasta they ordered from a nearby restaurant, along with breadsticks and steak and chocolate cake that is going to be destroyed by the time they start if George doesn't sit back.

Dream realizes that George *loves* sweet things. Salt, just the same, but lately George has been going down into the kitchen late in the evenings to grab chocolate kisses and suck on them instead of biting into them because he loves the flavor lasting in his mouth.

Dream doesn't think about that longer than he needs to.

The two office chairs in front of Sapnap's desk keep knocking against each other and George keeps fiddling with Sapnap's setup in the way Dream does to George before he streams. Or had, when George was still living back in England.

"Talk a little louder," Sapnap says to Dream as he presses his headset to his ear.

"Hello, hello," Dream obeys, curls his legs up on the bed. He involuntarily scoots back. "Are you positive I am off screen?"

“Duh.”

Dream and George make eye contact, and George slouches in his seat.

“Sapnap,” he says. “*C’mon.*”

“Are we ready?” Sapnap claps his hands together. “Can I go live?”

Dream regards him for just a second, little frown over his face, a tint of dimness.

Dream’s doubt sinks into his stomach, and he wishes it would’ve stayed away and chosen another time to approach him. He’s more than tired of it appearing like this, and now as he looks at Sapnap, the rush gets to him, and his anger knots below his belly.

It’s easy to swallow it down. Simple, so simple to *leave it for another time. But today it’s harder.*

“Are *you* ready?” Dream asks gently, as Sapnap’s word is the final one.

No eyes meet his, no smile rises to Sapnap’s face. But Dream cannot talk him out of this because they’ve pushed a promise publicly where everyone can see, where people have been waiting. And they’re beyond thrilled for it too.

When Sapnap goes live, Dream freezes.

He listens as he rolls back onto his weak hands, watching from a side perspective as George and Sapnap show off smiles and hands around each other’s shoulders, cheeks pressing together like they’ve been so desperate to share skin for this long.

It’s amazing, and Dream is shot back to years ago when they were all doubting success and leaving hesitant thoughts in each other’s heads, only for Dream to push and push, for Sapnap to drag them all forward, and for George to continually pick them up when they had fallen through deep, pitted holes of uncertainty.

“And Dream’s here,” George turns his head to look at him, eyes piercing like faint arrows of gold right into Dream’s chest. “Say hi!”

Dream pauses for a minute to drop his shoulders in sincerity.

“Hi!” He smiles as he looks from George to Sapnap’s side profile. The grin on his face is wide, and Dream warms at the thought of his own happiness.

They eat, they talk, they bicker, they joke, they answer questions, and the longer Dream relaxes into Sapnap’s mattress, the longer he works out that this bedroom, these walls, this home belongs to them just as much as it belongs to him.

A silent, unseen vibration of his phone startles him, and Dream looks up at his friends only to find the shell of George’s expression on him. His eyebrow raises at Dream and he gestures down to Dream’s phone.

they want a hand reveal, George’s message says.

Dream nearly cackles out loud.

If you want my hand next to yours, George, you can just ask.

This time, George leans his chair back. He slides himself off screen in order to cock his head to the

side and give Dream this look. This under-satisfied, annoying look of irritation.

read the chat, idiot.

Dream reads it. He finds spams of the number one and the number two.

George rolls his eyes at Dream's cocked eyebrow.

hold on, George types. **sapnap asked if we should play a game.**

Uh huh.

George goes a little red.

Later on, when Karl and Quackity both join the stream, exhaustion oozes through his nerves. He wishes he were in his room with his back pressed against his chair, his headset snug against his ears, laughing into his mic as he teases George and Sapnap about whatever comes up. He wishes he could hear Quackity, hear Karl, but instead, he has to listen closely to what is being said.

The audio is *shit*, first of all, and George and Sapnap keep laughing anytime Quackity brings up something about Florida.

And all the while, Dream sits off on the side and pretends he understands.

"Tell us about the house, though!" Dream hears Karl say, enthusiasm in his voice.

He's excited, and while Dream gets it, he wishes they'd talk about something else.

"Dream keeps the temperature pretty fucking low in here," Sapnap groans, looking over at Dream with a smirk. "I freeze my balls off."

For a moment, Dream notices his grin.

"I do not," he speaks up. "I keep it warm for all of us."

Sapnap looks back. It's the first time they've looked—*really looked*—at each other since their argument. He rolls his eyes playfully at Dream.

"You'll have to cuddle me until I'm warm then," Sapnap tells him, eyebrows arched in a thoughtful form of truth.

In just a single second, Dream reduces into the bed.

"Anything you want," he promises, watching the way Sapnap nods back at Dream.

He turns back to the stream. "Living with Dream, *holy shit guys*, it's so—it's so good. This guy is like..." And he goes on.

And as he goes on, Dream stops listening and instead focuses on the movement of Sapnap's mouth and the upwards tick of his lips as he grins.

George bites into the cake as he talks to Quackity and crosses the camera to give some to Dream. He cups a hand underneath Dream's chin as he feeds him. Crumbs burn onto Sapnap's comforter, but the two of them brush them away before he can even see. George's knee is shoved on the mattress and it only worsens the chocolate on the top of the bed, but Dream whispers to him and holds laughter in his chest as he tries to stop George from spilling it.

“Stop getting it everywhere!” Dream finally spits over his laughter.

George bounces back with him and climbs off the mattress, and it’s only then when he notices how close they had been with George trying to stay off camera.

“Hurry and finish it!” George ushers, his mouth resembling how it was when he had eaten Nutella on his toast. Dream grins at the sight of him.

Instinctively, he lifts his hand and wipes the corners of George’s mouth. “You’ve got it everywhere.”

His voice is low, but Sapnap still turns to them, blinking slowly. He lacks the snide look he had worn earlier, and instead sits with genuineness on his face, and Dream looks over at him with this gigantic smile that he feels the edges of it dip back through him until his heart warms.

“Come on, George,” Sapnap says to him. “Let’s play. Everyone’s on.”

And when Dream and George make eye contact again, Dream slowly, discreetly pushes him forward until he’s shoved back into the camera’s view. For a moment, Dream radiates a low hum through the laughter in the room, sets his feet down on the edge of the bed and scoots as close as he can.

Had he moved any closer, he’d be in view. But as Dream ponders over the possibilities, he thinks of just *doing it*. Putting his face out there as hundreds of thousands of people watch. He thinks of telling Karl and Quackity about Elytra beyond this stream, and thinks of unwinding parts of himself to feel okay again.

Because it’s worth it for these rushes he gets.

The interference isn’t fair to him. He craves the deep-rooted freeness, wants Elytra to know his friends and their lives.

The longer the night gets, the longer he misses her. And Dream ends up sitting at his own desk to join his friends online, and he’s thankful to hear them up close, to get an earful of laughter and giddiness and to feel like his chest is at peace for once.

He sends his mother a text to ask her how Elytra is, and when she tells him she is fine, Dream simmers down.

It’s hours they stream, that they switch from Sapnap’s channel to George’s, different camera setups and angles, wall reveals and pieces of furniture shown to the world. But Dream doesn’t mind letting the world see the details—they’re small, and it’s George’s details—it’s Sapnap’s details.

But as the hours of streaming come to an end, George and Dream sit idly in Discord. Sapnap has gone to bed, claiming that the yelling he’s done has dragged the fatigue out of him.

“I do have something to tell you though, George.” Dream sits up in his chair as he pulls up his emails, eyes squinting at the light that brightens around him.

George hums, bringing a new sound to the silence they’ve been sitting in since the stream had ended.

“My merch company.” He pauses for a second to think. “They want to meet on Tuesday with you and me in Miami. It’s in Fort Lauderdale, so I told them I’d talk to you. Production is out of

Orlando, but they base the company in Fort Lauderdale, so.”

George says nothing for a moment.

“This is about me joining?” George echoes finally, not adding anything until Dream gives him an approving click of his tongue.

“Yeah,” Dream says breathlessly. “Cool, huh?”

“Holy shit, yeah.”

The end of the day, it turns out, becomes very long, because Dream listens to George and his ideas of merch and his website changes. Sapnap’s been different, since he’s been in the United States and since he’s been a part of Dream’s merch company for some time now, but as they talk about him, Dream tips toward his worry.

“I was going to ask my mom about leaving Elytra with her, but then I—I don’t know, I kind of had this *awful* idea about asking Sapnap,” Dream laughs under his breath as he puts a foot up on his desk. He nearly kicks over his water bottle when his leg slips forward, but he repositions himself and pretends nothing happened.

“Why awful?” George asks.

Dream scoffs. “Because he’s mad at me.”

“I think he’d most certainly love the idea,” George says to him, humming as he settles for a pause. “You guys have probably made up by now. Go—go give him a little kiss on the head and he’ll be better.”

“*George!*” Dream muses.

“What?” George presses playfully.

“Shut up.”

“Fine, fine. I’m serious, though. Did you see the way he kept looking at you tonight, and talking about you? He’s okay. I think it’s his way of apologizing,” George says under the low breath of a sigh.

He’s right. He’s completely, devastatingly right, and Dream knows it.

Which is why, when the next morning comes around, Dream asks him.

With a confident body and strong knees leaning up against the counter as Sapnap hands him a plateful of food and a fucking mimosa—*yeah*—Dream is beginning to understand Sapnap’s love language the longer he lives here.

“So, you’d do it?” Dream asks as his fork pokes into his food. “Like actually? You wouldn’t be worried?”

Sapnap snickers as he takes a sip from his own drink.

“I’d be fucking worried man,” he says, widening his eyes at the look Dream gives him. “Not like that! I’d be fine! Yes, I’ll be fine! I’m—of course I’m gonna be a little nervous? But, are you kidding? I’d love to spend some time babysitting. I wanna just. Go swimming with her and watch some—”

“No swimming,” Dream says quickly.

George kicks him under the table. Dream turns to look at him and blinks like a lost puppy. George glares over his glass and gives him *some* sort of look.

“Uh.” Dream clears his throat. “Sorry. Uh. You can swim, of course. Safely.”

Sapnap smiled shyly. “Yeah, always.”

Over breakfast, Sapnap encourages Dream. He practically convinces him, through bites of sausage and egg, about how excited he is, how lovely he’ll make the overnight stay for her. And Dream believes him, he *does*, but the ball of worry rolls around in his stomach unfaithfully.

“The meeting’s not that long, right?” Sapnap asks.

“Right.”

“So you’ll have a ton of time to just relax?” Sapnap smirks, looking over at George.

The two of them exchange a glance, looks of relief, of satisfied smiles.

“I guess. We’ll just get hotel rooms after the drive,” Dream answers him as he sits back.

Sapnap’s eyes look over Dream’s face, the tightness of his shoulders and his neck.

“Do me a favor, dude,” Sapnap sighs. “Get laid.”

Dream sputters as a line forms between his eyebrows. He looks down at the table to see if any of his drink has blown across the plates. He’s relieved to find it has not.

“Sapnap!”

George giggles to the side of him.

“I’m serious! Take some time and just, I don’t know, meet someone.” He lowers his voice until he sounds genuine. “I mean, when was the last time?”

He feels like he is choking on his nerves, like he’s standing in the middle of a frozen ocean.

“I’m not even going to answer this one,” he says as he points his finger into the air playfully. “I’ve been busy!”

Sapnap and George laugh quietly, and Dream reddens the longer they do. A blush tickles up from the back of his spine, and he feels it wrap around near his belly. His ears go red, too, and he almost whimpers to tell them to shut up.

“Dream!” Sapnap adds. “If you can get that girl’s number from the park without revealing yourself, I think you can fuck someone in Miami without telling them you’re *Dream*.”

He doesn’t admit that he gets a warm flush in his chest thinking about their argument and how Sapnap has turned it into *this*, but still he chuckles.

“What if they ask me if I have a kid?” He crosses his arms over his chest.

George scoffs. “People don’t do that on one-night stands. Usually, they don’t care, they just want you to—”

He stops. Sapnap looks at him. Dream looks at him—*really* looks at him.

“No,” Sapnap urges. “Go on, please.”

“Oh, shut up.” George rolls his eyes before he turns in his chair to look at Dream. “We can go out if you want to. You don’t have to do anything with anyone, but if it comes to it, you should. Stress relief.”

“Thanks George, I know how it works.”

As he sits back, the tension in his body dissipates, and Dream, for just a second, doesn’t know what to say to his friends. He looks at their barely hidden smiles and he thinks: *home*.

This is home.

Breakfast while talking about sex and laughing over the blush that scrapes over Dream’s cheeks. It’s becoming a home.

He doesn’t have to make it all make sense while they sit in silence and think about Dream’s dick—*fuck*, they’re all certainly thinking about him having sex now, and for that, he’s going even redder in the cheeks.

Dream squishes his fingers to his own cheeks in a failed attempt to rid the color. He moves his eyes toward Sapnap, raising his eyebrow one last time.

“Are you sure?” He asks softly and hesitantly and carefully and with a fair amount of worry that it scares himself.

But Sapnap pushes his chair back and stretches his hands above his head as he yells with his yawn.

“Yes, now let’s get in the pool. Let’s go swimming. I want to swim.”

Dream’s head turns to George and he looks over him with questioning eyes. “Wanna swim?”

George regards him, looks over into the kitchen until he sees Sapnap hidden behind the columns. He’s silent for a moment, and Dream wonders what runs through his head as his smile appears and then disappears. But all George does is nod.

“Sunscreen,” George says solemnly. “Don’t forget.”

Chapter End Notes

a trip... an overnight trip is coming for the two of them. i have a lot planned to the end for this fic and i am very excited, so i hope you are as well because that hurt/comfort and angst tag is looking **very** good right now

as always, thank u so much, much love always. [reese](#)

Chapter Summary

“*Stay*,” he could whisper. “*With me*,” he could add.

Chapter Notes

my apologies for the late chapter, i've been trying to get one up every week, but this one is a couple days late, and probably because of the length and a few struggles here and there, but i hope you enjoy!!

sorry for any errors!

cw for minor injuries

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You know, if you want to just—*I don’t know*—try the burger, George, we can go back.”

George’s head lolls to the side, and he gives Dream this look, something akin to mischief and defeat, and if Dream didn’t know any better, he’d call it desperation.

“We’re not going back!” George grumpily says as he looks down at his phone, fingers scrolling over his map and zooming out to find where they are. “It’s literally ten miles in the other direction.”

His hand swings around until he points behind the car.

“You wanted the goddamn cheeseburger,” Dream laughs as his hands tighten around the steering wheel. His eyes close fondly while he blinks, the car continuing to advance down the highway. They’ve only been on the road for an hour, and with another two and a half to go, Dream thinks that turning around to get George food wouldn’t be the worst thing. “I asked you four times, *four exits ago*, if we should go back! And you said ‘eh, I don’t know.’ and now you’re whining about being hungry!”

George grumbles and sinks down into his seat.

“Well, now it’s too far! We can go to McDonald’s and I’d be fine,” he admits.

“So you’re saying you want to stop?” Dream asks as he looks to the side.

For a moment, their eyes meet and George pinches his face so hard that he bursts out into laughter.

George moans, “I don’t care,” against the palms of his fingers and jams the pads of his thumbs against the underside of his chin. “We can do—you know what—let’s just do whatever you want. Okay? Sounds good?”

Dream pulls off at the next McDonald's, buys them a large order of fries to share over the middle console. They don't even get George the burger he had been asking for. They forget it between the bickering and the laughter. But he doesn't complain. He sits back and takes fry after fry into his mouth as he watches the greenery of the Interstate disappear past them.

It's peaceful for a while, besides the rolling of one of their bags in the trunk of Dream's car. They end up having to pull off to the side again to push it up against the wall to prevent the noise from occurring every few minutes. But as it settles, they listen to slow music, loud rap, small artists with pleasant voices and lyrics that make their chests shiver with unique feelings.

Neither of them say much while Dream drives, the clocks just continue to break and then break again, time becoming theirs as silence leaks out like paste onto the asphalt they drive on. George turns up the volume when the song on a random playlist interests him, and Dream peers over with an empty smile, filling it with the blood of warmth when George hums and slouches in his seat.

He looks so animated, like this, underneath the sun as it sits directly above them. So unreal. And a moment looking at him in this sense makes Dream wonder about his perspective—if maybe he looks to Dream in the same ways, if he thinks Dream looks cordial when it rains, or if the sun makes him burn with a glow.

The hum of the car becomes peaceful after some time, and they fall into conversation about each other once they hit midday traffic.

"Have you ever thought about what you'd describe me as?" George asks him as he tucks his feet up on the seat and as he turns his body to Dream.

Dream furrows a brow and mutters, *what*, under his breath before he glances over at George.

"Put your feet down," he says to him. "I don't want something to happen in case I run into someone or in case someone hits me."

George clicks his tongue in frustration, finds a new comfortable position to sit in as he adjusts his body toward Dream. "Answer!"

"Okay, what was it again?"

"How would you describe me—*like*—if you were to talk about me to someone, like a complete stranger, how would you describe me?"

Dream ponders, stares at the license plate in front of him and then thinks of George in England, George through his headset, George who makes him laugh, who is always there for him, George who *wasn't* there for him—which was entirely Dream's fault. Dream frowns.

"You're funny," he settles with.

George scoffs. "What?!"

"No, no, okay. Um, I think..." And Dream hums. "You're impatient. Not that it's a bad thing, but when you want things, it just means you won't stop wanting them until you get what you want."

Then he stops. He looks over at George whose eyebrow stands tall on his forehead in a focused demeanor.

"Well, now you've got to explain, because I've always thought of myself as patient, to be honest."

Dream rubs his cheek up against his arm when he feels a tingle of color burn forward. *He's blushing*. Holy shit, he's blushing on this car ride while he talks about George—to George.

"You want to talk to me when *you* want to talk to me. Whether I'm busy, or in a call with someone else, you'll message me—I don't know, you always try to throw in something I like in order to draw me away from what I'm doing."

"Actually?" George asks, a twisted smile curling over his lips.

Dream hums. "Yeah, you'll suggest we play one of the few games I like when it gets late. And I can tell you don't want me to sleep because you'll continue the conversation, or you'll do something I want to do because you know I won't disagree with you."

George looks ahead at the road. He lifts his legs back up onto the seat, and this time Dream doesn't have to tell him to fix his position. He lets them down himself. "So you think I'm impatient because I like to talk to you?"

"What?" Dream pushes quickly. "No. I think—I jumped into something else there. You're impatient because, well, I dunno, cause—Does everything need an explanation? I just notice it sometimes."

"I suppose not," George chuckles under his breath. "Give me more though."

"See," Dream says, pointing his finger George's way to prove his point. "I'm getting there."

"Okay, go!"

"You're kind," Dream says instantly, not looking at George as the traffic lets up and as his foot presses harder on the accelerator. "You care about the people around you more than you probably should."

And before George can interject him on that one, Dream clears his throat and says, "no, I won't get into it." George stays quiet.

He blinks at Dream heedlessly, lets his fingers card together over his lap as he waits.

"I'd tell people they couldn't miss you," Dream promises him as he opens and closes his mouth, lips sticking together as his words dry. "I'd tell them you were beautiful. Tell 'em you'd probably be laughing and that they'd probably hear it from across the room."

George listens with a scarlet warmth that teases at the tips of his ears, redder than when he had been sunburned. His grin extends over his entire face, but he hides it behind the palm of his hand.

"You're smart. Like, so incredibly smart and people overlook that side of you and it pisses me off," Dream admits as his head shakes side to side.

"Why does it piss you off?" George's voice fills the car.

Dream glances his way, then watches the road again. He wishes there were more fries in the car so he could chew on them and close silence with a few noises that could tone down his fluttering nerves.

Most of Dream is unsure of *why* he thinks these little things about George to such a deep extent. He just always has, and even in the past few years he's given himself into his thoughts and his curiosity because George has always made him think. Has always given him a reason to. Whether

through those nights of tight-chested calls where he thought about pushing them beyond places they shouldn't go—places he wasn't sure he'd even like to go, or afternoons of peaceful silence after long streams. It was always *George* who had him at ease, always leaving him to think.

“Because so many people—I don't know. I think everyone knows you're smart, I'm not saying they don't,” Dream says, and George gives him gentle eyes and whispers, “*I know*,” but Dream continues by saying, “I just wish people would recognize it more often. You know the answers to almost everything, and you've helped me with so many things that I would never have figured out on my own. You're so—you're so smart, George.”

And this time George laughs. Genuinely. From the coals grumbling at the bottom of his belly, producing smoke and huffing out past his lips, he *laughs*.

“It's because I am older than you, Dream. I've got more experience. If we get a flat right now, it is going to be me who knows how to change the tire, not you,” George says matter-of-factly as his breath runs out.

Dream squints. “Okay. That's false. Fuck off.”

Then it's quiet. And Dream's faced with this wall of fear that he's said absolutely too much in the small space of his car, smelling like McDonald's fries and cologne. It fits, it does, but he wants to roll down the windows and let that smell of *them* drift out the window until it disappears.

George curls his legs up on the seat and turns toward Dream, tucks his knees in as tight as he can while still staying buckled. His cheek presses to the headrest.

Like this, Dream can hardly look.

Like this, Dream *wants* to look.

Like this, Dream *looks*.

And George doesn't even blink from beside him.

“I'd tell people you have a nice jaw,” George says suddenly in a voice close to a whisper. “That your eyes are pretty and your facial features are bold.”

Oh. He's—He's going.

Dream slides a glance George's way, like he's drawn to him from the very sound of his voice. His chin rests on his knee as he hugs his own body, and Dream looks kindly and knows he'll do anything to keep them safe in this car right now.

Everything inside of him feels taut, like tightly pulled strings, ready to be snapped at the sound of a horn.

“I'd tell them it would be easy to find you. You'd be tall.” George's smile is natural in his voice. “Probably wearing sweat shorts. A tank top. Or a sweatshirt, depending on where you are.”

Dream snickers.

He takes a deep breath, curses himself for the way he shudders so visibly. His lips part and his tongue pokes out to wet them. And George must be staring. *How can he not be?* He's been looking at Dream this entire time and he talks like the sucking of his tongue is too sweet for him.

This sort of intimacy is meant for distance, where they can't see each other, for times where instead of George's eyes burning into the side of Dream's face, they'd listen to each other's breaths over the phone, and count them to tell each other's emotions.

But this is how Dream *wants* things. Like he's thought of many times before. Easy. Simple. George in Florida. The two of them next to each other in simple conversations and all of it flowing like it is nothing but casual.

He's quiet as George continues.

"I suppose it's from carrying Ely around," George says gently. "But you've got nice arms. Careful hands too. Such hardworking hands. Always gentle around other people, always caring."

Dream swallows hard, tightens his jaw. He stares forward.

"I'd tell people about you, regardless. 'He's always looking out for people,' I'd tell them. And they'd ask me why, but I couldn't give them a proper answer." George's voice is *too* much. "Because it's just all the time. Dream's everywhere. He's so thoughtful, he's considerate, he's kind. Never wants to leave people out. Always tries to include people, regardless of if they deserve it or not. So selfless. So smart."

Dream's eyes squint hard, and the force of the air conditioner burns tears that form at the corners. He feels it worm inside him, his nerves lining his belly that slowly crack. George has always done this, has always known how to talk to him like this.

"He's strong," George whispers. "Mentally and physically."

And when he says it, the tear at the corner of Dream's eye caves. It falls. He doesn't move, only settling for a harder grip on his steering wheel as his teeth drag his lip into his mouth.

George leans to him, presses the tip of his pointer finger into the tear and traces it down his cheek until it melts.

"He doesn't think so, sometimes, but he is," George adds. "Always."

The quiet sound of a breath exhales from Dream's mouth, and he pinches his eyes closed for a second, his eyelashes becoming wet as he eases in thought.

From George's words, he nods.

He wants to hang his head, or let his lip tremble, or clasp his hands together as his acres of weakness take over him. But his eyes stay on the road as his ears open.

"I'd tell them he's an incredible dad," George nods. "That he's my best friend and that I'm glad I have been able to stick with him this entire time. That he's dragged me past my own mud to get me where I am today. I'd tell them without him I'd be nowhere, and with him I'm thankful to be everywhere."

"George," he whispers, like he's heartbroken.

Dream wipes his face again, harder, rougher, until the bridge of his nose burns, until a glassiness of hopelessness clouds his being. "You're incredible."

"I'm just honest, Dream."



The floor of their hotel is quiet. There's a light out above them, and George makes a couple of jokes about the place and their awful choice in carpet and decor down the hallway, terrible wallpaper and choices of trim around the door. It's a funny thing to hear from George's mouth because it amuses Dream so much to where it burns at his cheeks.

He goes on and on and makes it into this awful joke, about how whoever owns the hotel must have millions and, "this is the fucking wallpaper they go for? Shit. It's so shitty."

Dream feels at ease when he trips over his feet, distracted by his laughter.

They find their rooms at the end of the hallway, directly across from each other, and George suggests they nap, claiming how tired he is and how long the drive was. They've still got a few hours until their meeting, anyway.

And he's right. Completely. Even Dream's hands are exhausted, knuckles and nails and pads of his fingers all aching from the squeezing and turning of the wheel he's done. His head aches, sharp stabs, and stings to his temples. He needs a pain killer, Ibuprofen that is tucked into his bag. But both of them are still stalling in the quiet stillness of the hallway.

"Yeah." Dream presses his back to the wall beside his door. "Wanna check out your room?"

"Or we can look at yours." George's knuckles crack when he messes with his fingers. Dream pulls a face as he watches him.

It's almost weird, looking at him facing forward like this after hours of driving, after hours of only getting to glance at his side profile.

"Which one?" Dream asks.

"Let's just—We'll go in your room and look. You probably have a better view, since you're on that side!" George hurriedly walks forward and thrusts his shoulder against the doorframe.

Dream smirks. *Impatient.*

They're met with a view when the door opens. It's as expected, but seeing it in person is phenomenal.

What gets him is how big the windows are. Glass from floor to ceiling, a midday sky that looks perfect against the swell of the waves. He can see the sand, the people who are right at the shoreline. Cars on the roads. A bit of rain.

He thinks Elytra would love the view. She'd *point* and *gasp* and her eyes would sparkle in admiration.

"*Blue!*" She'd say. "*Big!*"

Dream sends Sapnap a picture. **Got in the room. Show Elytra :)**

The curtains open wider, and freckles of white beat against the ground, lighting up their bags and the sheets. Dream wants to dive into it, wants to smell something other than his old sheets back

home for just a night, maybe feel the new press of a firm mattress against his back as he sprawls across something cold. *Hotel beds always feel like that.*

“The beach is pretty,” George’s nose and his curious hands press to the glass. Dream wonders if he’ll leave a print there. “I want to see it up close.”

“We will,” Dream promises. “We will. Do you want to go now?”

Then George looks at him with a tug of amusement at the corner of his mouth. “Should we? Before we nap?”

I won’t sleep anyway, Dream wants to tell him.

“Indecisive.”

“Me?”

Dream chuckles and shrugs, plopping down on his back against the bed. He grabs the pillow and stuffs it under his neck so he can see George.

He thinks it’s a little gross—lying on top of this comforter like this, when he just wants to shower and scrub his body of the entire day, until he smells like hotel soap and shampoo that isn’t his. Until he brushes his teeth and spits into a sink that *isn’t* his. Until he’s tucked under the tight sheets and kicking his feet out and spreading them smoothly over soft bedding that *isn’t* his.

Alone.

He grimaces a little, but George pulls him from his thoughts.

“I’m indecisive?” George asks again, a little teasingly, like he knows it’s true.

That smile. Your goddamn smile, George.

“That’s definitely something else I think I’d tell people.” Dream blinks, rolls his eyes playfully when George cocks an eyebrow up. “You’re a little indecisive.”

It’s easy to notice the sunlight around George’s edges. The way he stands at the window, his back against it, sky behind him and water below his feet. Dream wants to take him down to the shore, watch him pull his pants up past his ankles as the water glides over his feet.

“Oh fuck off, will you?” George grumbles.

In just a couple of seconds, George decides. He presses his palm into the mattress and glares as much feeling into Dream as he can.

He’s a lot warmer as he closes toward Dream like this.

A gulp involuntarily drifts down Dream’s body.

He thinks back to when George had originally pointed out his arms in the car. “*You’ve got nice arms,*” he had said with a daring look Dream wasn’t familiar with, proceeding to make him cry just moments later.

And now he’s here, up in his space, with darker eyes and his chin pointed at Dream like he is desperate to bleed confidence. Like he *wants* to prove he can make a decision that’ll get Dream off the bed and on his feet in a heartbeat.

"You know what, Dream?" George asks him as he presses his knee on the edge of the mattress. Dream watches with a glint in his eye. Curiosity. He cocks his head to the side, flips a smirk across his features.

Dream wonders if things like this are just becoming more familiar the longer they get to see each other in person.

Maybe he's not nervous about it, maybe he's just falling a little shy like he did when they'd flirt over the phone.

Over the phone, he thinks—where Dream would tease George in his silence, or when George would hum at Dream's low voice, or when they'd dip into places they shouldn't. Where George would end the call as soon as their words became a little *too* real, when Dream's heart would pound in his ears *because five more seconds of this and Dream thinks they could've put their friendship in danger*.

But now, with his fingers all splayed over the mattress, Dream thinks this Florida air is doing something to him. Turning his faintness into confidence. And he loves to see George like this, tongue in his cheek and eyebrow cocked up like his next words will eat at Dream's throat.

Maybe he wants that. Maybe he wants it more than anything.

"What, George?" Dream smirks. "You wanna see the water now?"

George's face changes. The sunlight spreads under George's eyes and across his cheekbones, and Dream watches it all. The grit under his smirk falls to something genuine and Dream stares, stills all of his muscles and bones and blood to just *look*.

"I do. Take me there," he whispers as he leans forward.



Dream takes him to the water, and he watches as sunshine warms the top of George's hair, as sand covers his feet, and as he becomes lost in thought as time drifts by.



Over the table, rib sauce covers the underside of George's lip. He chases down quick words with alcohol as he points to randomly drawn designs against a shitty and torn napkin. Dream observes all the while, shoulders slouching and muscles relaxing as his eyes look from napkin to food to drink to George's eyebrows that furrow in concentration.

They've just come from their Merch meeting, and George has been alive since the moment they stepped out the door, his body burning with new ideas and his hands tingling and itching to get to work.

Even at the table in their hotel lobby, while they eat expensive food and use borrowed pens to draw

on wet napkins, George looks lively. Young. *Excited*. And Dream gets this rush inside of his chest that tugs a smile to his mouth as he follows.

“And what if we did like, a color change in the middle of my name here?” George points the back of the pen into the smeared drawing.

It ruins the napkin even more when he touches it, and Dream can hardly make out what he’s creating as he does it. But he nods with as much encouragement as he can give. He would do anything to keep this wet, filthy napkin in his possession with brainstormed GeorgeNotFound merch on it—just to remember the light that had rolled across his friend’s face.

He clears his throat. “I think that’s a great idea.”

George looks at him, sticks his fork into his mouth and then lets his head sink to the side.

“You hate it.”

Dream scoffs. “Didn’t say that, I’m just. I’m distracted.”

The sound of George’s laugh is so rich tonight. He’s throwing his shoulders into his laughter, showing his teeth as he laughs around his straw. The lights have dimmed around him, have given him this string of a glow that flutters around his shoulders as he presses against the booth.

It’s weird, to be sitting here in another city with George, when Dream thinks they’re not meant to be seen like this.

Sharing expensive food and watching each other sip drinks as ice cubes melt on the warm table—it’s a subtle difference than their headsets that crush their ears as they listen to the thrumming of laughter that vanishes somewhere inside of their bodies.

Dream wants to stick his hand out just to touch him, to make sure that George is really here.

He’s hardly tipsy, but the mere shape of George’s smile is enough to turn Dream’s stomach into something delicate, enough to send his nerves back to a lower level.

“Why are you distracted?” George slouches back against the booth and fuck, his hair goes a little messy from it. It looks good this way. “Dream! My ideas, I think I have some great ones.”

“George,” he laughs as he scrapes his chin. “I believe in your ideas. They’re great. It’s cute. You should send them off once we get home.”

“Cute?! That’s it?”

There he goes again, making Dream laugh. He pulls out this deep-rooted cackle that makes Dream lose his breath.

And he has to distract himself with more water, *tons of water*, in order to hide how wide his smile is threatening to spread. Even under the heat of the approaching summer, with the breeze of the nearby water, Dream feels cold. So he shivers and warms his hands against his lap as he laughs with George and as they go from playful arguing to more ideas to dessert.

They end up in the restaurant for another hour, just talking.

It’s probably the most they’ve spoken to each other since George has arrived in Florida.

All of George is in front of him—arms and legs and thighs and ankles and hips and cheeks and

knuckles. Dream almost flushes over when he realizes his gaze has made its own frame over George.

It's harmless as he looks, as he thinks, but it's hard *not* to think about how this moment is really the most time they've spent together. His frown is present suddenly.

It's not really his fault, so to say, but he's been busy.

He's had Elytra.

He always has Elytra to look after, to take care of, and there's been videos to edit, work to get done, and in between, he and George haven't really had the time to just—talk.

So they spend their last hour in the restaurant talking about Sapnap, and how his applications for school are settled in, how he might work through the summer on some classes. They talk about how real it'll feel, how they'll bug him about homework and look over his shoulder when he's in the middle of tests. Dream tells George he shouldn't. George tells him not to tell him what to do. They laugh.

“What else do you want to do tonight?” George asks, voice breathy. His eyes appear tired, but Dream thinks George would admit it if he were ready to go back to the room.

For a moment it's quiet, the threaded knot of anxiety that's been sitting in Dream's belly, the supposed elephant in the room, the sound that's been singing all around them since they got in the car and since they left home.

Going out. Getting laid. Doing whatever the hell feels good to him, whether it's spending every single hour of it asleep, or staring at the ocean, or downing as many drinks as it'll take to make him feel something other than that burning sensation underneath his skin.

But the way George is looking at him. It's stirring something strange inside of Dream.

“Like what?” Dream asks, innocently—not completely on purpose, but because he doesn't know what else to say.

He likes this. Sticky fingers over ribs. Red stained lips from the single glass of wine he's had.

George laughs a little as he sits on his hands. “A club, maybe? We can find a bar. Go for a walk. You can download an app to meet—”

“George!” Dream cuts him off with a mumble.

Neither of them says anything, and Dream just tilts his head as he looks at George and then down to the table. When silence thickens and becomes too loud, he sighs. Then shrugs. Then sighs again.

“I don't know,” he admits honestly. “I just want to spend the evening with you. If it's okay.”

The last part isn't meant to appear as a confession, but George looks up at him as if Dream has just burnt him, as if he's forgotten the damn sunscreen back home and they've been on the beach all day. His eyes read simple tranquility, but the way his lips pinch together makes Dream think he's got the wings of butterflies all tangled up in his chest.

He looks *scared*.

And Dream has this urgent desire to help him, to pull him out of whatever water he must be

drowning in—because George does this for him, all the time, and Dream wants to do the same. Wants to drain the oceans and clear his skies so George's eyes will brighten again.

Because this is expensive ribs and chocolate cake and milkshakes and wine and bitter tastes in their mouths. He doesn't need to ruin the night with a couple of words.

"We can just." Dream sits up a little, takes his hands and places them flat on the tabletop where George can see. He may be uncomfortable too, but he doesn't show it. It's not something George needs to see. "Walk down the beach? Or whatever you want to do?"

George's head goes back and frustration leaves his vision. Dream stares, guilt deflating over the front of his chest.

"Dream. This is your night. Don't give me the final decision here," he says, peering at him through full lashes. His silence is deafening, and pots and pans sound like racing cars in their background as their eye contact becomes too strong. "Didn't you call me indecisive earlier today?"

He pulls a cherry from a melted milkshake to be thoughtful, to give Dream a moment to himself as George messes with his own hands. But Dream still watches as his teeth mesh with fruit.

"I did."

Dream is being *careless* now with the way his eyes won't leave George's mouth, and George knows it because he chews on the stem cautiously as his nimble fingers twist it around and around.

"So," George shrugs, shoulders up to his ears. "Don't make me choose. I'll do whatever you want to do."

It's a little tiring—it's *fucking awkward*, but more than anything it's tiring—this back and forth, playful attitude they keep giving each other. Dream telling George to decide, and George lifting his chin and asking Dream to take him to the water. And then here, now, with Dream tapping his foot against the ground, nearly begging George to take the lead, to pull him and tug him until they're somewhere that isn't full of other couples and families trying to enjoy a night close to the beach. He's sick of it, and he thinks about how to say it without exactly saying it.

So he says nothing.

He pays the bill, leads George out of the restaurant, and ends up barefoot on the sand with drops of the ocean against his cheek only twenty minutes later.

It's chilly, but Dream ignores it.

He's not particularly dressed for moonlight over the beach sort of weather, where waves meet sand and where random shells turn up and where the wind bites at his cheeks, crisp and uncomfortable as soon as the drips of water dry.

George's hands soak, and he's slapped against Dream's back and his chest about seven separate times now.

Dream is wet and cold, and the wind has picked up. He can't exactly see too much of the clouds, but he's almost positive it'll rain sometime soon.

Fort Lauderdale is quiet. It is friendly to them as the hours turn from nine to ten and then to eleven. Dream calls Sappap as they sit along the sand, socks tucked into their shoes and fingers becoming grainy as they lie on their backs.

Dream thinks maybe he should feel embarrassed as he whispers goodnight to Elytra, as he pitches his voice upward and as he tells her how much he misses her, how he nearly chokes up when he says, *I love you*. But George cranes his neck to the side and just watches with a sugary face of adoration, rosy-kissed cheeks of red and huge eyes of silence. His mouth tugs upward into a smile and he wipes over his own cheeks, spreads sand across his skin in a messy way, but he *observes* every move Dream makes as he talks to his daughter.

And Dream releases the tension that has been held within himself. He's not embarrassed. He's learning. George is teaching him how to be more open about these little things, even if it's through the singular look of the warmth in his eyes.

An idea surges across him the moment Dream twists his neck to George.

They look at each other.

With ocean air between them, Dream pushes the phone into his cheek as a way of contemplating with himself before he can even decide.

And then he acts.

"You wanna say goodnight to Georgie?" Dream stares directly into George's eyes as he speaks, and then looks into the sky as he waits for Elytra's response. He hears Sapnap on the other end, along with a few exciting gasps.

His stomach whirls.

A sudden hand at his elbow brings his eyes back to George's—hopeful, radiant, *wanting*, curious. "What did she say?" He asks delicately, rolling up on his hip, slightly into Dream's proximity.

Dream puts her on speaker, and together they listen to Elytra wish George a good night.

It rains ten minutes later.

It's not persistent, but it comes down so fast that they soak underneath a downpour and become defeated as their shoulders bounce in laughter.

If Dream comes to a halt, if he feels hard enough, he could find the alcohol still making circuits through his body from earlier. He could blame these *touches*, these sensual grasps against George—he *could* blame it on the rush of sugar, the hint of alcohol he's had tonight.

But he can't. He does it because it's George. *It's fucking George.*

It's George and his damp hair that is flat against his head, his vicious hook of a smile, all teeth and wet palms that try to hide it. George and his tight shirt that sticks to his chest, showing the outline of his abdomen and George who reaches up to mess up the strands of Dream's soaking wet hair. George with bloodied cuts at his feet from stepping on the wrong rock and shells and George who shouts at Dream from thirty feet away under the glorious moon on their night.

Dream is a weak man and his lungs burn as his blush amplifies richly in the dark. They have tossed their phones near their shoes, discarded them like old envelopes. Dream pays them no mind, and instead, he shoves George when their laughter hits a peak.

They tumble into the waves together and come out choking on salt with spit dribbling down their chins.

“Fuck off!” George yells as he coughs, his hand clasp ing over Dream’s wrist as they both stand, hips swaying when the waves crash at their legs.

Dream can only laugh. His words get caught up and twisted at his tongue.

“My goddamn balls are stuck to my leg right now I swear!” George shoves him until Dream is in the water again, but when he comes up, he grabs at George’s hips and pulls him until he’s against him.

For stability.

“Quit fucking doing that,” Dream laughs, voice dangerously low from how scratchy it feels.

George stares with a tilt of his chin, eyes darkening as he realizes how close they are. Dream sees the change in his expression, a coiled spring that has corroded and has snapped all in front of him. He blinks and steps into Dream’s space, eases his palm against Dream’s side. For stability. *For stability*, yeah.

“You stop first,” George says calmer now, like his words taste fuller against his tongue. “You started this.”

“Right.” Dream doesn’t let go of him. *They don’t move from where they hold on to each other.* Dream’s heart speeds up into his throat. “I started it. Me saying we’re going to get soaked earlier and me suggesting that we stay away from the waves, yeah—right—I was the one who pushed you in the water.”

George drags his tongue over his teeth and then clears his throat.

It takes Dream a second to notice that George is shivering, but amongst the few touches between them, George comes closer, moving against him for warmth, and Dream feels his chest cave into his stomach when their bodies become flush.

Laughter seizes as soon as George’s arms tighten around Dream.

“I’m cold,” he says as his goosebumps rise. “Why are we still here? My feet hurt.”

Dream instinctively loops his left arm around the small of George’s back, holding him closer. They’re squeezed rib to rib like this, and Dream feels the rhythmic beating of George’s heart against his damp shirt.

He’s rather late in understanding how unreasonably gorgeous George is like this—with a pair of black pants and a baby blue button-up that is transparent by now. His hair is long and in his eyes, and Dream doesn’t think twice before sifting it from George’s vision, revealing the entirety of his forehead.

George watches him timidly, pinches the material of Dream’s shirt between his two fingers like he’s holding onto his last ounce of who they are.

It’s kind of gone, Dream wants to tell him. We’ve stepped into this embrace, George—over this current that begs to drag us apart. Our legs are drowning and it won’t be long until we are too.

“Because.” Dream looks between George’s eyes and keeps his distance from his mouth. *He’s not sure.* “I have no idea.”

He wants this?

Because he doesn't want to let go?

Maybe because George is so fucking warm and he's shivering against him, and Dream's dreadfully needing and hoping that some vulgar force will get them to say words to each other that are as wet as their bodies.

"We should go inside and clean you up."

George's eyes flutter for a moment. He lets go of Dream's shirt. "I think you're right."

Despite the look Dream wants to give him, or wants to draw out of him, he just grins and untangles himself from the embrace. It's one of their firsts, and although in water and cold down to the bone, Dream doesn't think it'll be a memory to forget.

George follows him upstairs.

They drip onto the floor of the lobby and are given towels as soon as they make eye contact with staff members. And against the elevator doors, the two of them are heedful to the surrounding walls, avoiding the press of wet clothing to expensive wallpaper — "shitty."

Once they make it to their floor, George drops his shoe and sand scurries across the carpet. Dream runs, pounds his feet into the floor until he's at his bedroom door, face coming down from a searing war of high blush.

The laughter simmers, and Dream doesn't care this time as his back creases to the wooden door.

He stares at George, who follows the same pattern, back to the door and breath stuck in his throat.

Dream doesn't need to say goodnight. George knows this is where they part like they have many times at home. And it's worse now, with their heavy clothes. Unlike at home, they have privacy here; more details to call their own just for the night, and Dream wonders if George will stay up for hours just looking out the window.

Dream wonders if he should ask him back over. If it's appropriate to do so.

"Are you going to shower?" George asks him as his hand knots through his hair.

Dream nods. His hand is already on the knob of the door behind him.

"Yeah. Then sleep."

George raises his eyebrow. "You're going right to sleep?"

Fingers slip from the doorknob, and Dream slouches a little. Perhaps George isn't meaning to distract Dream from his plans of the night. Shower. Put something warm on. Look online. Write something. Think. Sleep. But it's with kind intent that he does it—distract Dream with another raise of his brows like he's interested.

"I think, yeah," Dream chuckles. "Did you want to play Monopoly or something?"

George blinks. "Did I—*what*?"

"Nothing," he laughs. "Why'd you ask?"

"Because I thought we'd do more."

Dream tries to repress the smile that creeps up the side of his face.

“If you want to shower,” he starts, keeping his eyes settled on the line between George’s eyebrows. “And change into something warm, then you can come back over. If you—if you want.”

George looks at him.

He doesn’t look away.

“Sure,” he whispers. “Yeah.”

Then he jerks his hand toward his own room, and disappears into it, promising to text Dream on his way back.



Within an hour, Dream is showered and tucked under his covers.

George hasn’t messaged him and Dream isn’t sure if he’s still underneath the spray of the shower, appreciating the warmth of it at this time of the night, or if he just fell asleep already, but Dream doesn’t want to message him.

It brings a vague smile to Dream’s face. The thought of George curled up over the mattress just across the hallway, resting like he should be after the long day they’ve had.

They’re both familiar with these late nights. As one in the morning comes to them, doused in darkness and soft moonlight. But Dream is alone, and his hands feel clammier now that he knows George was supposed to be here.

So he texts him anyway, pulls his phone out to write, **Get too tired?:(**

But before he can send it, a couple of knocks distract him. It surprises him and he blinks in the door’s direction, exhibiting shock as he throws his blankets off quickly.

George stands before him, looking not so pleased, face a bit on the drowsy side, eyes intently focused on the floor beneath them.

“Hey,” Dream greets him, lowering his worry far underneath his stomach. “Long shower?”

It brings a chuckle out of George, but he limps forward, foot after foot until he leans on the edge of Dream’s bed, and when he does, Dream digs his worry back up.

He asks, careful with his tongue and the shakiness in his voice. “Are you okay?”

Dream was too rough with the way they shoved at each other near the waves. He regrets going to the beach. He regrets coming to Fort Lauderdale. There’s something else wrong and Dream is thinking and thinking and he doesn’t finish his thoughts because George looks up at him and points at his feet.

“Showering irritated the scrapes on my ankles and my feet, and I tried to heal them up, but I had nothing.”

Dream frowns. He steps forward when George lifts his sweatpants up to his knee. There's bandage wrapped poorly around where he's injured, and Dream delivers an honest, deeper frown when George looks up at him and *shrugs*.

"I went down to the lobby to get some bandages at the first aid place. Was bleeding a bit," he says.

"You didn't even call me?" Dream asks.

He doesn't know why he asks it—but he asks.

George shrugs. "Was I supposed to bug you? I knew you'd probably have just gotten out of the shower."

"Well." Dream scrunches his nose up "Yeah. Of course you were."

As George smiles, he leans his back flat against Dream's mattress. He lies against the side of it, his legs hanging off the side. The bandages are still in his hands, and he holds them up as his head tilts toward the side. He's not dressed as if he is about to sleep. He appears to be in more casual wear, with a tighter pair of sweatpants and a thin, black V-neck. And unlike earlier, a necklace clings to him, between his collarbones, the letter *G*, gold and in a fine font.

He kicks his leg out and sighs dramatically, peeling off the edge of his sock.

Dream bends down at the side of the bed and reaches out to take the bandages from him. He offers a smile his way and hears his knees pop when he crouches.

"I'm here now," Dream whispers as his hand slides around George's ankle. "Can I fix these bandages for you? I should tighten them."

In front of him, George nods.

He inspects it.

A turning edge rolls around in his belly when the skin of his hand meets George. There's dried blood at the bone of his ankle, on a few strands of hair, and Dream uses a piece of the bandage to scrub at it. George lifts his head up and scowls at him. He groans.

"What the hell are you doing?" He asks, face softening. He laughs shortly after.

Dream looks up and lets George's heel rest on his bent knee. "I thought you showered?"

George rolls his eyes. He fakes a gag when Dream grabs a tissue this time, wetting it with the water bottle and then dabbing it against the wound on his leg. It's a minor cut, about a centimeter in length.

"I did shower," he tells Dream, "it just got worse once I got out. I guess? Bled a bit more. It's not bad, though."

Dream hums.

"It's not bad, right?" George asks like he needs the clarity.

So Dream looks at him. "No."

He's not exactly good at this. Cleaning wounds. But he's trying. And he's had some experience for the times when he and Drista were kids and when he'd try to help her before their parents would

see. Or when Elytra had scraped her knee their first time at the playground. *He wants to try.*

“Stay still,” Dream says when George squirms.

George pokes his foot into Dream’s ribs, and his mouth puckers together into a wounded pout. “It hurts, idiot.”

The spark under George’s eyes fades in an instant, just as soon as Dream presses into the muscle of his calf. He doesn’t recoil from the touch, he just perches up on his elbows and looks down at Dream like his bones are becoming all twisted. He closes an eye when Dream undoes all the bandages, and he unveils discomfort the moment his skin is bare.

“Ow,” George says as soon as Dream gets his hands on a bottle of disinfectant and as soon as he presses a cotton ball to George’s ankle.

“Yeah.” Dream looks up at him. “*Ow.*”

“Don’t do that.”

Dream flushes at his tone. “Sorry.”

He doesn’t want to have to explain but—he is sorry. For all of it. For these tiny cuts on George’s legs and his feet, for contributing to his injury, for the agony underneath George’s breath.

“It must hurt,” Dream whispers as he changes his position, relaxing against his knees, sitting back on them. George’s ankle rests up on his shoulder, and they’d argued about it for a solid ten seconds before Dream stripped away all of his thoughts because he needs his leg straight in order to treat him this way. A bent knee will do him no good at a time like this.

George twists his hip, ankle digging into Dream’s neck, bandage scraping his ear.

Positioned between George’s legs like this, Dream feels trapped. Between thoughts and desires and hopelessness. Tension doesn’t break him, doesn’t lunge inside of him, but Dream would be a liar if he says he hadn’t thought about George’s breath against his. In this hotel room. In this bed.

“It does, but only a bit. Just cuts from those stupid shells.” George’s head goes back onto the pillows.

Dream pinches at his leg.

“I think the shells are pretty,” he shrugs. “Just watch your step next time.”

“In the dark?!” George bends his knee to blindly reach for Dream, *probably to pinch back at him*, but Dream grabs hold of his hips and pushes him back down.

For stability.

“Yeah. In the dark, George. Or wear shoes.”

“In the water?!”

Dream wants to giggle over the heated screams inside of his chest. “Yeah. In the water.”

“You’re so annoying,” George tells him softly, letting his head roll to the side until his cheek squishes against his shoulder.

Dream is endeared at George's approaching smile. It's small on his worried and pained face, but the longer Dream holds him, the longer he tightens white bandages to his skin, the wider his lips purse into a smile. He shivers in his thin shirt, and Dream resists the urge to ask him about changing.

"*Would you like something warmer?*" He could ask, and he could watch George's fragile shirt become heavier in a sweatshirt Dream owns.

"*Get under the covers,*" he could say, and watch as George's injured feet turn to just lumps underneath Dream's hotel bed.

A man in a bed that isn't even his.

"*Stay,*" he could whisper. "*With me,*" he could add.

For so long Dream has been wrapped around such tight posts and pulled so taut to his bones that now he doesn't want to take these moments and wash them away with the blood that'll run down the drain. He wants it to stay—this feeling that weakens him, that shreds the bad parts of his heart and fills him with poems of ardor.

So he caves. He thinks of lines behind the pale fire in his eyes and writes them onto George's calf when he presses a single kiss to his skin.

George gives him a world-ending smile and hides it behind his forearm. It's charming, watching his eyes flutter as his leg jerks a bit, startled at the sudden touch of a mouth against him. He edges down into the mattress and teeters on his elbows, but his eyes never leave Dream's. Heavy clouds of a rose splatter his cheeks, but he doesn't look away.

Dream thumbs where he holds George's leg, and it tickles against him as his lips pull away.

"What are you doing?" George whispers.

Dream meets his eyes, a smile creeping up his mouth with innocence.

"Thought you deserved it," he mutters. "Went through a little pain today."

When Dream tries to play it off, George is there, bending his knee, even though Dream has asked him not to. But this time George is further down the bed, and his calf plays dangerously close to Dream's cheek.

The look he gives is enough to bring static to Dream's core. George's chest rises carefully, and his necklace is against his throat. When he swallows, Dream watches it fall toward the bed.

His gaze darkens.

Dream feels it shudder through him.

"Again," George whispers. "Do you think I deserve another?"

And if Dream hadn't been a weak man before, he feels as though George's words could make him one. Right here. With his knees on the carpet and with George's leg against his shoulder, making his nerves go all numb from pressure.

"Yeah—*fuck*—course I do."

He holds George's hip, *for stability*, and then gently brings his mouth back to his leg.

A kiss at his Achilles tendon.

George giggles, and Dream floats higher.

It's so warm. So, so warm.

Listening to him like this is an honor, having George's kneecaps knock against his skull because a light kiss at the calf tickles him. *It's an honor.*

And Dream wants further in. He wants to please and give and take and take and take.

"You're so annoying," George says playfully when Dream's mouth meets the inside of his knee.

"Oh, am I?" Dream looks up at him, whispering as the tip of his tongue flattens against his skin. *"Am I?"*

The muscle at George's thighs tense, and his hamstrings lift and try to squeeze around Dream as soon as his mouth latches to his skin.

George reaches out, like a man in need, a man with desirable want. And Dream lets him. He lets George pet over his hair and thumb at the hard line between his eyebrows, and lets him praise him when Dream takes too deep of a breath.

He doesn't ask for anything. Doesn't whisper the sweet word of, "again." Instead, he pushes his leg toward Dream, skin to meet the warmth of a pair of lips. It draws brief gasps from George's lips.

If this means stepping too far, then Dream fears they've already crossed across their line.

George's laughter is sweet, and Dream wants to drink it in.

"Let me see you," George whispers as soon as Dream lets his leg down and as soon as he dips below George's vision.

Dream lifts, presses a knee to the side of the bed and nearly chokes on his own heartbeat when it jumps to his throat.

"I haven't gone anywhere," he teases as he moves George's leg, readjusting him until he's positioned with his bandaged knee flat on the bed. "Don't move this."

George's eyes shift, but he blinks a few times, showing warmth and kindness. He nods. "You're bossy."

Dream smirks.

He stands to his feet and kicks behind himself until he hears another pop.

Then it's him and George and the edge of the bed, shins merely touching tight sweatpants to looser ones, pulses near one another.

"Let's remind each other whose bed you're in right now," Dream says annoyingly as he disposes of the cloths.

As he washes his hands in the bathroom, he can hear the light chuckling from George as he keeps his leg straight.

“Is that how this thing works?” He asks with a raised voice.

Dream peeks his head out of the bathroom to look at George. He’s so cute. God. He’s so fucking cute, with his messy hair and his tilted head and his side smile.

“What thing?” Dream asks, breath tiring in his throat. He walks back to the edge of the bed, and George reaches for him, pressing their foreheads together atop the mattress.

Dream has to force his fist into the mattress to prevent falling on top of George, but he gets this rush inside of him and suddenly his mouth dries.

The air is dense as Dream watches George mess with his necklace, fingers vibrating over the thin chain.

Their breaths are low, caving at the same sort of pattern, in and out and in and out. Dream wonders if George is thinking of how young this moment is, how their night is young and how the sheets crumble to their liking tonight.

Dream is sick of hiding the parts of him that get so locked up and broken.

The back of his hand touches George’s cheek. He hasn’t shaved in a couple of days, and Dream’s knuckles touch against the scratchy stubble on his skin.

“Can I kiss you?” Dream asks.

George’s nails press into Dream’s flesh, binding little crescents onto the nape of his neck. He blinks hard and parts his lips, and Dream has to count to five before he says something else—before he attempts to take back what he’s said. Before he gives himself a moment to wonder if he’s fucked it up.

“You kind of already did that, did you not?” George whispers against the shell of his ear.

He whispers it as though he’s given a promise to Dream. But Dream knows him better, he can tell George is stalling, despite the gracious touch he gives down Dream’s forearm.

“Well,” Dream breathes as his eyelashes flutter against George’s. “I guess you’re right.”

George gnaws on his lip and exhales.

And Dream watches. He raises an eyebrow and watches as George’s face shifts, turns into a soft smile, as his hand caresses the side of Dream’s jaw.

The touch is light, and Dream wishes he’d say something as they pull apart. As he gives him space.

“Talk to me,” Dream says to him, and for a second, the grip on his forearm tightens. It’s hesitation in its finest, and Dream’s heart threatens to shatter.

But George has always been good at this. Hiding in plain sight—underneath Dream’s chest and below his pulse.

He sighs. “I’m just thinking.”

He sounds honest, and Dream doesn’t doubt that George is as honest as ever. It’s still unreal that he’s this vulnerable across these sheets. It brings a rise to his chest the longer he looks at him. Warm and sensible and pretty. Dream leans back and sits beside George’s bandaged leg, pulling his hands around his own knees.

As he looks at him now, he can see the falter of fragility amongst him.

“Hold on,” Dream says, making his way to his bag. He pulls out a penny and presses it onto the bed between them. It brings a chuckle out of George, brings him back to that familiar and silly, boyish smile of his as Dream whispers, “penny for your thoughts?”

Maybe the breathless laugh out of George should heal Dream. Or maybe it would have given him the power to fix all of George’s wounds and his worries. But he clashes with the fear of helplessness as soon as George opens his mouth. It’s ironic, Dream thinks. How he can spend so much time trying to keep himself safe, when in reality, all he was doing was harming parts of him he hardly knew existed.

“I want to kiss you, Dream,” George tells him, murmuring on the tip of a breaking cliff they threaten to fall off, just the two of them. “But if I kiss you tonight, then it won’t just—I will not want to just stop.”

He’s hopeless. “Then don’t stop.”

“It’s not that easy,” he whispers, sitting up against the headboard. He looks similar to how he looked in the booth earlier. Friendly, slightly tipsy, swirling a cherry stem around his pink, stupid mouth. Dream wants to tremble.

It’s not easy because it’s *never* been easy. Dream wants to hold his face and tell him how life isn’t fair. How trees won’t grow on the ice and it isn’t fair because maybe polar bears want to see green. How fish can’t live out of water. He wants to tell George that they aren’t fucked — not because he’s got a kid, not because their friendship is ruined. He wants to tell him. He has to.

“This is because of her,” Dream whispers. Because he knows it’s the truth.

George’s bottom lip trembles. He swallows hard.

“It’s all new.”

“I know.” Dream closes his eyes. *Oh, you’ve got a family now, have you?* “I know.”

Then George is there. With his clumsy fingers against Dream’s jaw, touching him so faintly, like he’s a gift ready to be opened, his creases so sharp and threatening to be torn.

Dream parts his lips and stares.

“Tonight?” George asks as his thumb stretches over Dream’s cheek.

Dream wants to pull his chest forward until he can feel how heavy George’s heart is beating. Thick beats of thoughts, of lust, of hopeless need.

He closes his eyes and kisses George’s thumb. “Your leg is bent,” he says, defeated.

“I don’t care,” George says breathlessly.

“You think too much, George.” Dream’s hands cover George’s hips, and this time, it’s not for stability. *It’s all for him.* He squeezes, rests his head against George’s collarbone as he shakes his head from side to side. “I wish you wouldn’t sometimes.”

“You want to know what I think?” George’s hand slides up Dream’s neck.

Here he goes again.

“What do you think?”

“I think you should have slept with someone tonight,” he admits, as his fingers pinch at Dream’s earlobe. The touch is warm, but his words are rough. Dream can hear the bitter edge to the way he speaks, but there’s heartbreak underneath his tone. He’s always been able to understand George’s crevasses like this. Even as he touches against the dip at his waist, he understands. “Because now you’re here, and I can’t avoid how much I want you.”

Dream lets his arm fall back onto the mattress.

“Maybe I should have,” he says with determination, “You’re right. *Maybe I should have.* But I think we both know that’s not what either of us would have wanted.”

Their eyes are set forward on each other. All of Dream’s fears kept underneath with the dark parts of him, traded for white, gorgeous lust as he looks at George. He’s teasing him. He’s getting to him. George knows Dream wouldn’t have wanted anyone else tonight. They had this conversation at the table, and Dream traded the idea for laughter and salt in his lungs. But they’re here again, and this time, Dream wants him to know.

George hums. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

It’s Dream’s last tug.

He sits there, trying to straighten out George’s leg as his body melts forward, giving in to the hopelessness he’d die for.

“I said I wanted to kiss you,” Dream whispers ridiculously as the pads of his fingers press into George’s jaw, “not marry you, George. We can go to bed, do something else, I don’t know. This shouldn’t have to feel like this. I don’t—I don’t want you to overthink it.”

Because it’s true.

And he’s so desperate for George to understand that.

George breathes heavily next to him, face blotching new shades of red that Dream hasn’t seen before as his back splays across the sheets. He turns abruptly to Dream with a jaded look on his face.

“Kiss me,” he whispers. “Please.”

“Yeah?”

“Kiss me because I hate hesitation.” George pulls at the ends of Dream’s hair. “Kiss me because I hate thinking too hard.”

Dream caresses the corner of his mouth. “I will kiss you because you asked me. For tonight.” *For stability.*

And Dream does. Between the lips on George’s mouth and the lack of hesitancy of hands under George’s chin, he hears, “*God,*” and it makes him roll his eyes.

His knee drives into the mattress as he hovers over George, drinking and drinking every breath that he gives, their mouths becoming a hot seal of numbness the longer they touch. It burns, and while Dream feels it down in the pit of his belly, he can’t help but notice that even the tips of his toes feel like they’re on fire. He tries his best to avoid George’s injured leg, but George does the most awful

thing of kicking it out that it makes the both of them laugh. Hard.

He hates this. He fucking *hates* it.

It's just tonight. And it makes it all worse because Dream loves how good George tastes. How good he feels from the way his hands are so easy on Dream's chest and how they fit so well between his body and at the dips in his collarbones.

George's body moves fluidly against Dream's, like someone frustratingly built them to be doing this—kissing like they wanted to find the pits of each other's hearts. It's so *stupid*.

George is too good of a kisser.

A whimper smooths off of Dream's mouth when George's wet tongue presses to his. He presses harder, kisses harder, responds harder until George is pushing at his chest and using his knee to wield him away.

"Christ Dream," he calls breathlessly. "Give me a second to take a breath."

Dream smirks at that, finds his eyes amongst the lust that thickens between them. George cradles Dream's face, pokes his thumb between his lips and paints his mouth slick with spit repeatedly until Dream's mouth opens voluntarily. George giggles, blushes relentlessly.

Dream feels his stomach much calmer when he sees George has *smiled*.

"Cute," George whispers at the look that crosses Dream's face. "But take a breath, seriously. Or at least—"

Dream goes dizzy when George cranes his neck to the side and tilts until his eyes meet the ceiling of the hotel.

"At least, *here*," he says.

The lights are still on, and it's far from the romantic first kiss Dream ever imagined. But he's kissing George, and he's so *fucking* turned on that he doesn't give a shit if the lights are on or off because George guides him to his neck and he whimpers so sweetly when Dream's tongue flattens over his pulse point.

"Here?" Dream whispers to him.

George shivers as his hands tighten in Dream's hair. He lets up and says, "yeah, *there*."

And Dream laughs between sucking against his neck and against the heartbeat he can feel on his mouth because George's pliant body shivers against him, stiffens and arches upward in urgency that Dream has never met before.

His lust becomes more lust, and Dream cannot let up on it when George's hands meet the bare part of his abdomen. His hands feel so faint, a fairy-like touch, like he's crowning him something he shouldn't, and Dream hates how this isn't *them*, but they've made their steps.

This bed isn't theirs. But this moment is.

"Good," George tells him in the shell of a cracked voice. "It's so good."

Dream desperately wants to drop his hips, wants to meet his body in ways he knows shouldn't happen in this hotel. But he doesn't. Because fucking George in this hotel room is one of the worst

decisions he could make. And he'd spend an eternity hating himself for it if they followed each other that far.

"Yeah?" Dream says anyway, like he has screwed his choices since the start.

George pushes. In a hurry, his hand moves up and down and over and across Dream's body like he's searching, like he's gripping, like he's needing and wanting and hoping for something Dream isn't giving him.

And Dream wants to scream. Wants to tell him it's all in front of him, not just for the night, not just in some shitty small roomed hotel they're filling up with hot air and their cries of desperate pleasure.

"Never stop," George cries.

"Baby," Dream whispers as he presses the bridge of his nose against George's neck.

"*Dream*," George warns, whimpering right after. "Shut up."

And Dream obeys. But he lets himself be guided back into a deep kiss, all mouth and no tongue. All emotion and all heartbreak and all devastatingly painful tears that transpire in the trenches of his chest. George's lips taste stronger than desire, looser than need, and Dream unfolds under his mouth, whimpering carelessly.

Dream is weak tonight, and George feels *so* good against him. He kisses him until the heat dies down, until Dream stops them, until he dreadfully rips himself from George and presses his nose to the glass window, fingers and palms pressing shortly after as he catches his breath.

The ocean is still there. The room is quiet.

And Dream bites so hard on his lip that he has to forbid himself from thinking of his mouth before he draws blood. The taste of George remains.

Behind him, George snuffles. If he is crying, then Dream is a dick, because he doesn't turn around. He stares at the water and squints. He waits to see if any waves in the distance crash. It's easy to tell sometimes.

Footsteps edge toward him, light and forceful in his space. Dream doesn't turn.

But when arms slip around his waist and when a familiar beat of a heart comes close to his back, Dream freezes. His eyelashes flutter shut, and as George's palms flatten over his belly, he lets his mouth open. Dream rolls his tongue over his swollen lips. And he sighs.

George is there.

Touching him. They haven't completely fucked this up.

"Are you cold?" George whispers.

Dream's eyebrow furrows. "No?"

Even though the beat of George's heart strengthens him, Dream thinks George's hands against him are much more appealing. They bring warmth. Radiate a sense of security in him. And as George grabs the edge of Dream's sweatshirt, Dream understands there is no better feeling than George's hands.

He undresses him slowly.

Dream turns, watches the gentle look in George's eyes as he lifts his hands into the air. George has to stand on the tips of his toes to get the thick sweatshirt from Dream's body, but as soon as he leaves him bare, Dream lets out an exhale.

George keeps his eyes on Dream as he slides Dream's sweatshirt over his own head. He closes his eyes once the hood gets stuck over his hair.

"Good," he says softly, "because I am."

A flush runs over Dream's cheeks as he regards him. He looks calm like this, his smile safe and kind. He stands up high on his bandaged feet and cups Dream's face. The sweatshirt looks much better on him, and Dream finds peace in knowing it is keeping him warm.

Dream holds at his hips, holds him to his bare chest. "Are you okay?" He whispers to him, throat scratchy and dry.

George smiles, thumbs across Dream's cheek and down his throat.

"I'm okay," he nods.

It's relieving to hear the words form over George's smile. They're whispered, but it's tender as George breaks at his bones, easing him as his hand splays over Dream's abdomen.

"Tell me, too," George looks at him. "Are you?"

"I am," Dream says. "I promise. More than."

George interlocks their hands. "Then will you kiss me some more? For tonight?"

For tonight. Dream chews on the words as he finds peace in George's eyes, in the way he touches and in the way he holds Dream. He brings their lips together, walks George back until his calves hit the edge of the bed.

Dream is a weak man.

And weak men cave.



Two nights later, Dream thinks that patience can *go fuck itself*.

The only time he's spoken to George since their night in the hotel was when they washed their dinner plates off at the sink. They'd whispered a couple of words about the meal, about how it was perfect for the weather—cloudy but no rain, light sun and not too much heat. Sapnap drank fruit punch next to them as they stiffened their spines beside him. It was all wrong.

Even though the thought of it might make him tense, Dream has spent every other second wishing he could be back in that bed, just so he could talk to George again.

He thinks of George in his clothes, with bruises pressed to his collarbones and against his ribs and

above his navel, where only they know. He knows it's all there, and it destroys him when he passes George in the hallway, watching as his jaw tightens, and as his nose flares.

George will smile, and Dream will smile, and George will smile again.

But as two nights turn to three days, Dream thinks it is unbearable. Truthfully.

He streams when Elytra sleeps. He sees George and Sapnap in his chat, and he wonders if they have talked, if maybe George has told him about Fort Lauderdale—a place Dream never wants to visit again, a place that'll always remind him of George. He streams, he reads, he spends too much time online and still, none of it distracts him.

So he knocks.

With rough knuckles and nails that crest into his own palm, he knocks against George's door at one in the afternoon, when Elytra has just fallen asleep to a movie.

In long pajama pants and a white t-shirt that hasn't been washed in a while, *Dream knocks*. With messy hair that is greasy, *Dream knocks*.

This is him. *Vulnerable*.

George opens the door, standing before Dream with a lopsided grin on his face. He doesn't look as rough, maybe a bit tired, but Dream thinks he might've just woken up.

He's got a spoon in his left hand and a container of applesauce in his right, and he blinks slowly as he steps back, allowing for Dream to walk in.

"Hi," he says with a flat tone.

"Hey," Dream answers. "It's, uh, it's been a while." He keeps the door open just a crack, but shuts it enough to give them privacy. "Three days, George."

George slowly brings his spoon to his mouth.

"I know."

"You know," Dream repeats. *"You know"*. So you've purposely been ignoring me?"

George swallows desperately, his eyebrows coming together to form a neat line. Dream sees it, his withering emotion as his face changes.

"We agreed, Dream," he fills their air with pain.

And Dream wants to pull him from those waters again.

"We agreed on not being friends?" Dream spits out before it's too late, and the slanted look of realization that George gives him is close to terrifying.

George swallows and sets his spoon on top of his dresser. He steps back and sits on the edge of his bed. Dream notices his sheets have changed since they've been home. Even his room appears cleaner.

"You're right," George says smoothly. "I'm sorry."

"No," Dream retorts as his eyes shift to George's knees, no longer bandaged but not covered either

as he sits in basketball shorts. “You don’t need to be sorry, George—I just—I wanted to know where you’ve been.”

It’s not surprising when George looks up at him with his brows furrowed, or when his hands come together at his lap, or when he finally blurts out the words Dream thinks he’s been waiting to hear. Maybe it’s been stuck in him this entire time, grinding up, or maybe it has just risen to his surface.

There’s been tension between them; all kinds, and Dream hopes George feels relief after this.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” George asks quickly, panicked and with an expression of fear. He wants to cover his mouth and Dream can tell because his hands twitch in his lap.

George’s eyes, staring down at Dream’s feet near the door, rise with tears.

“I know it was because of privacy and safety, but I—I am so fucking desperate to understand, Dream,” he croaks, almost too quietly. Dream is close enough to hear him though. “But I just don’t.”

As Dream finds the floor, he can’t help but hope it’ll fall through and place him back in his bed, where it’s safe and warm and where he’s alone. It would give him time to think, away from George. Because George has every right to think this way, but Dream can’t process these words he’s saying, not with the confidence he’s been building up since George has arrived and not with the weakness he’s been trying to shred.

It’s always been him and Elytra, and his mom and his dad and his siblings, and his family members who know very little about his daughter. Maybe her first name and Dream’s struggles. People who call him *Clay* and who brought him sandwich platters when Elytra was two months old.

Dream thinks back to George’s cheek against his chest in the hotel bed as he scrolled through his photo album on his phone.

“She was just six months here,” he had told him, flipping through the photos as their ankles stayed locked, bandages pressed to his bare skin.

George had pressed a kiss over Dream’s heart as they went through more photos, and as Dream tried to skip certain ones, George had grasped his wrist and whispered, *“wait, go back.”*

He had shown him all the years George hadn’t seen of him. Of Elytra.

“Tell me about this one,” George whispered against his jaw as they held the phone together, staring at the photo of Dream and Elytra in bed, their foreheads pressed. A photo his mother had taken when his daughter had turned one, when everyone was awake past midnight. George had asked, and Dream told him.

“Was it the photos?” Dream asks, his eyes becoming swept with honest tears.

A distressed look crosses George’s face. “What?”

“The photos I showed you. Is that what brought these thoughts?”

George is silent for a moment, and Dream holds that close to him, takes it between the narrowness of his ribs and holds his breath as he watches George close his eyes. Maybe the question is too much for George, or maybe it’s not something he wants to answer, but the longer Dream waits, the longer he breaks.

“We almost had sex, George,” Dream says with a sharp jaw, dripping an unfaithful amount of fear as his gut turns.

“I know,” George whispers timidly, his eyes lifting to meet Dream’s again. “You can’t possibly think that I didn’t enjoy what we did.”

“Well, George, it’s a little hard to do that when you haven’t even looked at me since we’ve been home.”

The pit of Dream’s belly crawls with ice, and it’s too cold—it’s all cold—George’s gaze and his mouth and his lips and the way his foot taps against the floor.

This is dangerous, and Dream wishes he could help George look less doubtful as he sits with his kneecaps pressing together. He looks tired, like he’s been thinking of this for the past three days as Dream has. Has he slept well enough? Does he miss the bed in Fort Lauderdale? Dream could ask, could approach him to answer all his questions.

But he won’t.

Because it’s not those questions that need answering.

“I think maybe you should tell people I was a coward,” Dream says with fragility, his teeth chattering behind his lips.

“Don’t you dare feel sorry for yourself right now,” George seethes through his teeth.

“I don’t know, George!” Dream thrusts the words from his mouth, angry and sudden and filthy, and he attempts to swallow as much of it back before he lets his heart crawl out of him. “I don’t know why I didn’t tell you. I was scared that you’d treat me like I was as weak as I was, or that you’d hate me and think less of me.”

Dream’s voice raises as he takes a deep breath, high and driven with guilt as he says, “I was scared!”

“Well, I’m scared too!” George struggles to say, shouting fearfully. “I want—”

Then fucking take.

The slow growth of anger dies inside of him and is replaced with open guilt. Dream has always feared it, wondering how awful it would hit him. But as he grits his teeth together, he realizes how unfair this feeling is.

“I’m not asking you to be her father,” he says flatly, his face growing colder with a pain of ruptured feeling. George isn’t wounding him, but the displeasure of life has settled between them, and Dream hates it. “I never have asked you to father her. My life—”

Dream stops.

He stops, because this is pointless. George is hurting. Dream is hurting. And things are unfair.

“I, uh,” Dream continues, “I think I’m gonna give you some space, George. Take Ely and spend a couple of days with my mom or something.”

Dream resists the urge to cry out when George’s hands clasp over his face and when the sound of a desperate croak bleeds between them. George’s shoulders roll forward and he knots his fingers

through the curled edges of his longer hair. Dream watches him with a sharp gaze as his eyes well up with tears. But he snuffles hard, to clear the throb of fire in his head.

“This is your home,” George says as he lifts his head. *Tears and a rim of red all play on his face.* “You shouldn’t have to go anywhere. If you want space, I should go.”

Dream gives him a smile. “Where the hell are you going to go?”

Then George stands.

On two trembling legs, George walks forward, fingers unconsciously reaching for Dream.

“Don’t go,” George whispers. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Dream says, blinking twice before he can get a clear vision of him. “You don’t need to. We just. You know. *We’re okay.*”

George looks weak in front of him. Dream is sure that he’s never looked this way before, with fearful eyes and a downward turn of a frown.

“*We’re not okay.*” George shakes his head from side to side.

Dream nods. Again and again as tears fill up his eyes. “We’re okay, come here.”

And George obeys, falls between Dream’s arms with a deep inhale and a crisp cry of uncertainty. He shuts his mouth and digs the bridge of his nose to Dream’s chest, to his filthy shirt that he hasn’t washed. He’s sure George doesn’t care about any of it, and that he rather cares about how Dream feels against him, or how their hearts beat together.

Dream is always stronger when he can feel George’s heartbeat.

He kisses George’s head, the strands of hair that are becoming so long.

“We’re not okay,” George whispers against Dream’s chest. “Please.” *Stay.*

Dream cradles George in his arms and keeps his lips taut to his head. “We’re okay. I promise.” *I can’t.*

So he goes. Because Dream is a weak man. And this time, weak men cannot cave.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading!!! there are just two more chapters and a we've got a lot to deal with so, i hope you do enjoy :)

u can find me on [twi](#)

lots of love always!! reese <3

seven

Chapter Summary

Sapnap doesn't hesitate. "Come home, man."

Chapter Notes

another long chapter!!! sorry for any errors, as always :)

please heed the tags (in general) but specifically i want to point out for this chapter:

mild sexual content and **minor injuries**

enjoy<3

Cinnamon and Swirl fanart by [Ren <3](#):

[cuddling with elytra](#)

[by the pool](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

One cup of sugar. *Two* eggs. *Three* days of radio silence. *Four* people around a cake with plates and forks and an assortment of drinks. *Five* minutes until midnight. *Six* days since Fort Lauderdale.

Dream butters a piece of toast because cake doesn't sound good to him this late. He eats it in silence near Elytra on the couch. She doesn't sleep because restlessness has crowded her since they've left home. Dream gets it. He understands.

The red frosting written on the cake has smudged, but Dream's mother still appreciates it as they eat it, as it becomes a mess of red and white and pink and even some purple and sprinkles because they've let a two-year-old help decorate a cake tonight.

When midnight hits, Dream wraps his arm around his mother and whispers, "happy birthday," to her, despite the cheering of his father and his sister and her friends. She hugs him much stronger, encourages him to get some rest because it shows—his exhaustion, the way his head hangs heavier than steel.

It'd be easy for him to give in and agree, to take Elytra back into his childhood bedroom, to lie next to her and hum syrupy tunes of songs she loves. But her uneasiness has been unreasonably consistent all day, and by now, Dream is blaming it all on the little details of a home that isn't necessarily hers.

She's got her stuffed bunny with its button nose that she presses up to Dream's chin every night, that she whispers 'kiss,' to, even if she notices her father is in distress. And he'll do it, he'll kiss the stuffed animal and give in to the imagination of a sweet child, just to see a smile bloom across her cheeks.

Her blanket has been left at home, and Dream has thought over three times now, about asking Sappnap to bring it, or asking his mother to swing home and grab it so Elytra's little fingers can clasp around familiarity as she sleeps in a bed that isn't hers.

This home is not new to her.

But Dream understands that after three days, sheets that smell like clean linen rather than the luxury of cinnamon and warmth, might just be off-putting. It's a physical comfort, to wake up to the same paint on the walls and the same sight of a photo in the same placement on the walls. It's home. And Dream knows that although her comfort may be within Dream's closeness, it's home that matters.

The colors around him fade out, they become muted, and the music playing becomes all wrong. His ears ache as soon as he pays attention to it.

A hand places on the center of his back, and he stiffens at its touch.

"Hey." He turns to see the edges of his father's smile go wider. "Tired?"

Dream hauls himself into a straighter position, shoulders leaning backward until his chest pokes out. He stretches.

"I, uh—yeah, kind of," he laughs before he sighs. "Hey."

In the room's corner, his mother looks toward them and raises her glass. Dream wonders if she's raising it to praise him for being such a coward. For failing all of them, for leaving his home because he cannot stand to be around his friends over the fault lines of a friendship. He haunts his own memories for a moment and nearly chokes on his theories.

"Is she not sleeping tonight, or what?" His father asks as his hip leans up against the wall. Dream watches him, finds the blur in the corner of his father's gaze, and it looks so much like him—hesitant, like he wants to admit something, and Dream almost wants to tell him to just spit it out.

Maybe that's what his friends have been seeing in him.

Spit it out, Dream. Say what you need to say.

You should've said what you needed to say a long time ago.

"She's so restless," Dream says through his exhale. "I think she's just uncomfortable. Missing home, you know?"

You know? *Please understand.* Tell me I haven't messed up.

"Well," his father smirks a little, and Dream closes his eyes.

"I know." He sniffs, taking the stuffed bunny from Elytra when she walks up. She takes off again. "I know. I—I know."

"You should take her for a drive, that's what we used to do when your sister wouldn't sleep." His father turns his neck back to where Drista and her friend hold two new toys with Elytra. "Just ride around and turn on some music or talk with her until she passes out. Works like a charm."

It takes a second for Dream to think about it, but with the time moving from twelve to one, and the thought of his daughter not getting proper rest, he no longer wastes any time.

He bids his family a safe night and deals with a few tears that ache in the corner of Elytra's eyes as he buckles her into her car seat. They're large across her face and they tug on the openness of his already sore chest, but her wailing stops after about five minutes of careful driving.

She falls fast asleep.

The car is quiet tonight. It purrs richly as he stops at red lights and as his foot shifts from the brake to the accelerator, but more than anything the cars next to him exceed noise, and he almost turns to tell them to quiet down. They roar to life, right through the cracks of his hardly open windows. He smirks to himself and shakes his head. He drives off.

Elytra doesn't wake, and Dream is grateful for that as he takes loops around the roads. He's confident the group of friends sitting outside have seen him pass a few times, wrapped in blankets and laughing together at the familiar car moving through.

The car is quiet, but Orlando is not. Dream isn't sure how to feel about it, because a busy city keeps his chest alive. And silence means more thoughts.

As he picks up speed down the highway, he can breathe in the night full of stars and moonlight and humidity. It feels warm in his lungs, but without the heavy pressure of the sun, he's able to grasp onto the feeling of what cooler weather really is. No rain. Some humidity, sure, but less of it with the sun tucked away into bed.

He pulls into a parking lot as soon as he recognizes how close he is to his neighborhood. There, he stalls, opens his phone and then runs his palm flat over his face in an uncomfortable worry, maybe in a hopeless thought that George will call and ask him to come home.

Maybe he'd tell Dream that the water pipe has broken, or that the power has gone out. Maybe he'd call for absolutely no reason. Maybe he'd call to tell him they should get some snacks from the store soon. Dream doesn't know, but he misses his voice, and his touch, and it's been days of suppressed words and the absence drenches him in strange feelings.

He looks over his shoulder and exhales with a grin when he finds Elytra still asleep. He opens Twitter. Then he opens Twitch. With the lack of cars, he turns on the radio, low music in place of car engines and tires over asphalt.

Twitch is never a lonely app in the middle of the night. Dream has always thought it to be when he's awake at three, or four, or up as early as five. But it's so lively, especially tonight, filled with people watching from all over the place, streaming anything from everywhere.

He finds Sapnap, streaming under *Valorant* with the title *just me, come come come*, and for a second Dream debates clicking on to watch, just to hear his voice.

But as soon as he refreshes the page, he's gone offline.

Dream lets out a sigh.

He sends Sapnap a text for good measure, to ask him about his stream, to start a conversation, to push himself into trying to come home.

By this point, he's unsure of what he's waiting for. Maybe for the time to move forward or for the clouds to thicken outside. For morning to come. A storm? He drinks from a bottle of water and taps his hand over the middle console.

did you watch! Sapnap says, attached with a :) underneath. **What are you doing up so late?**

Elytra won't sleep tonight. You up for calling? Dream texts, and holds onto the thought that Sappnap might just say yes, might just give in and listen to Dream's few whispers into the palm of his hand.

He doesn't wait long and instead flips his phone upside down and slouches, the nape of his neck scraping against the headrest behind him. It burns, the obvious stickiness of a sunburn stretching over his skin from the past few days he's spent outside with his father. His lips have gone dry, too, and he wishes more than anything that his chapstick lies in his cup holder, or that his tiny tub of rose Vaseline was smashed somewhere in his jeans pocket. But they're not. None of it is where he wants it to be.

The fringe against his forehead is messy, loops to a curl at his ears, and he feels out of place.

He wonders if George and Sappnap have talked *more* now that he's been gone, *more* than they did that night in the living room, when Dream had left in tears, when Dream had left George in tears, his hands in fists and with Dream's shirt wrinkled in the spot George had previously grasped.

The ringtone blares through the car. Dream struggles to grab his phone, but he answers quickly and then turns his bluetooth off, pressing the device against his ear.

"Hey," he whispers, hesitating to look back. To his luck, Elytra is still asleep.

Sappnap chuckles. "Hey. You okay?"

"I'm in the car right now—*shit*—it's nice to hear your voice, Sap. Hi."

A sea of silence rolls in, and Sappnap makes a sound, one that Dream hardly recognizes from him. It's almost parallel to a cry, a muffled sort of sob into a pillow, or the collar of his shirt. Dream doesn't want to overthink what he's doing on the other side of the phone, but his chest fuels a fire, and it *hurts*.

"Driving to where?" Sappnap asks, his voice hoarse. He mentions nothing about missing Dream, about gaining relief at the sound of his voice, but Dream doesn't complain. Maybe Sappnap thinks this is all as fucked as it looks.

Dream subtly hums as he looks around. He gives a fleeting glance to the dead trees in the distance, swaying from the wind, breaking off and falling to the cement on the ground. There's a grocery store nearby, and Dream watches people exit with one bag, two bags, some with over ten, probably. He'd go in this late if Elytra weren't with him, get himself a can of coke probably, drink it on the curb by the creek down the road, kick rocks into it. He'd think, let his eyes linger into the woods until he realizes he should head home.

It's been too long.

"Uh. Nowhere," he utters, slouching again as he runs his blunt nails through blond tips of his hair. "Elytra hasn't been sleeping well, so my dad suggested I take her for a drive. I've just been driving, so now I've pulled off."

"Where are you?"

Dream looks back at the grocery store.

He swallows down ruin and gives up his honesty. "Near the house."

Sappnap doesn't hesitate. "Come home, man."

Dream takes a breath of the air circulating through his car. It brings in his frustration and out his guilt and in his worries and out his fears, and it all runs in constant circles around the car. He breathes through it, lets it fill his lungs as he inhales.

“Sapnap,” he says, closing his eyes. Behind his lids, he sees them all in the living room

George. Sapnap. Elytra. Dream.

Four people. Three days of silence. Too many thoughts, and one home.

“How is he?” Dream asks.

It’s an instant mistake to ask, Dream thinks. None of this is Sapnap’s fault. It’s not his issue to laze back on or his responsibility to roll into. Dream has injured Sapnap amongst all the hurt as well, and he’s reminded of it too often. He shouldn’t be asking Sapnap, or begging him to heal the thin divide that Dream has shoved between him and George.

But hopelessness is abhorrent. And sometimes Dream wants more than he wants to give.

“He wants you to come home,” Sapnap tells him with a thick voice of sincerity. “I’m sure you know that.”

“I do.”

This time, when Dream takes a high breath of the air in the car, he tastes relief. He locks it in his chest and hopes that it’ll hang around.

Sapnap says nothing, so Dream hums to let him know he’s still on the thought.

“This is just. This is huge,” he whispers, a wry expression harming the previous smile that had taken flight to his mouth. “What the hell happened?”

Sapnap snickers. “To what, Dream? You? Him? To us? Let me tell you something,” and then Dream holds his breath and closes his eyes because Sapnap is delivering honesty, and he knows it, “have you ever stopped for a moment to realize how much you could do, right here, right now?”

“What do you mean?” He asks blankly.

“I mean, do you realize you could come home right now, walk into George’s room and just talk to him. Or sit us all in the living room and open up that part of yourself that you’ve been hiding and hanging onto for, like, forever. Do you get that?”

Dream isn’t surprised at the force of untouchable truth Sapnap gives. He’s never wanted to put up with people and their dragged out shit, or their unsettled business. Sapnap is the one who will walk into a haunted building and walk out terrified, just so everyone behind him will shut up about how scary it seems. Doesn’t matter if he’s going to be scarred. Dream hates it sometimes, how willing Sapnap may be, but he’s been this way for years, and Dream has loved him for all of it.

He’s brave, Dream thinks. How does he do it?

The corner of Dream’s mouth is bitten raw, and he gnaws on it profusely as he sits still and stares at the glow of a neon sign in front of him. He wants to walk inside, move his feet, let his legs stretch, but he’s glued to this seat, longing for a home that is his. A home he is avoiding.

“I know that.”

He does. He just can't bring himself to do it.

He's strong, George had said. *Mentally and physically*.

And it's a growth Dream knows is within him. Perhaps it's hard to dig out, and perhaps it's selfish of him to want to hear it from someone else, but just the reminder from Sapnap secures a plate of confidence down his chest and across his front.

"You can talk to us. You should. Please." Sapnap says. "This isn't just your life to live. You know, *no offense* and all."

"No, I get it," Dream replies as he traces his finger around the cup holder in front of him. "I needed to give him space, Sapnap. He needed it. I—Uh, I need it, too."

After the pause between them exceeds down the line, Dream wonders if this is all meant to happen.

Being young, having things to deal with other than what goes on in the public's eye. He wonders if it's meant to happen like this, the slow breaking of rocks before him, sediments grinding over time, kissing George and not fearing the consequences, but knowing them all, dealing with them after.

Hating them as their lips press together.

It's impossible to tell, but Dream doesn't like sitting back to think about stuff like this. He likes to think of what could be—a home full of love and life. Early mornings, baked goods, sleepless nights. It's all part of who he is, who his family is. Sapnap and George are new to watching him step out of the shower, to watching him cook, watching him push a fork to a child's lips. But they don't resent it. And it's unlikely that they ever will, because their friendship means more than a simple detachment of trust could.

They're all tender with the way they love each other, and their friendliness of one another, but Dream isn't sure where the line ends.

He's unsure why it's started loosening or why it's become so easy to get lost between the walls of friendship and attraction, whether it's love or a desire to grip on what he's always had—Dream isn't sure.

What he's got with George, it's so fragile in his hands.

"When has space ever helped you?" Sapnap asks, reeling down the back of Dream's throat to hook for his heart. *He's right*.

"It's for George."

"Be selfish, then. Come home."

Dream bites hard on the fat part of his tongue. He scoffs to himself, but he listens.

Sapnap adds, "do you get where I'm coming from?" Because maybe Sapnap fears scaring Dream, too.

So Dream says, "I love you," and "thank you," and then hangs up the phone.

Dream makes the quick decision not to think too hard.

He drives down the familiar road, passes recognizable streetlights until the headlights in his car burn low and fade away. There's a brief hum that echoes as he turns the engine off, but he ignores it, letting his spine sink into the seat until he's ready.

Somehow, the front of the house looks different, a bit more dull. Maybe Dream had taken some of the color with him when he had left, maybe the exterior and its lack of color will reappear now that he steps out of the car, his keys making noise in the front of his pocket.

Leaning into the backseat to unbuckle Elytra from her car seat, he hesitates. She's so calm like this, and he hates the idea of waking her when she's struggled for rest for the past few days. But home is near, and Dream brushes his fingers over her chin gently with a sad smile.

"We're home, sweetheart," he whispers as he lifts her into his arms.

She molds to his body, squishing her cheek to his shoulder, eyes staying closed as he steps toward the front door.

He'd enter through the garage, but it's the middle of the night, and the noise would be too loud, too much of a stun to the others in the home. So he sticks his key in the front door and uses his elbow to push down on the door handle. His heel knocks against the door solidly, and he swears under his breath as he turns around to grab it before it slams.

It squeaks as he shuts it with his fingertips, gentle and careful this time, and Dream thinks about that dog George wants. It would've barked at the sudden intrusion — good protection, but Dream would've sighed in annoyance as it would've woken up everyone, probably would've startled Elytra on his shoulder too.

But then there's Patches, who curls up against Dream's leg, and Dream seems to release all the tension in his body at the feeling of fur against his skin.

"My girl," he chuckles with a furrow of his eyebrow, circling his foot around her. "Hi."

He'd get the dog.

He'd do it.

For the pleasure, for the feeling of friendliness in such companionship, someone to always come home to. Another pet for everyone to love on. Maybe it'd jump in the pool, get its filthy paws on the couch after being outside in the rain, irritate them all when mud covers cushions. But they'd laugh and love on it, nuzzle close and name it something together.

He walks forward into the house.

The frames on the wall call to him, and he looks for a moment, swaying his body back and forth to keep Elytra asleep.

The thought of having George and Sapnap up on the wall makes him nervous.

It sounds right, sounds empty without them, but the thought has him shy.

There's a rustling in the kitchen, and Dream's heart mounts against his throat as soon as he steps

into view.

George is there, headset pressed against his ears and eyes heavy as he stands on the tips of his toes to push the jug of juice to the back of the refrigerator.

It's the first time that Dream has seen him in days, and he's gotten so used to seeing him daily for weeks that George looks so unusual in front of him. Dream grins timidly behind Elytra's hair.

Besides the nerves that are full and fat and stuck to every vein in Dream's body, he is at ease. The muscles in his neck go lax the moment his eyes drift from George's outfit to his hair to his tired eyes.

As George turns, his breath catches audibly, loud to where it makes Dream gasp. Dream stares at him in silence, a look of terrified worry as George glares back with wild amusement, concerned and curious. He lays a tentative hand over his chest as he moves the headset around his neck.

"Christ, Dream," he whispers, sending a chill through Dream's body. "You scared me."

"Sorry," Dream answers to him, dipping his chin to the side to check on Elytra.

George shuffles and presses his fists into the bar. He tilts forward on his elbows and takes a sip of his drink, and Dream presumes that he's doing it to waste time or space, or take a moment to himself because Dream's shown up so suddenly and stepped into his space and maybe it's unfair—but Dream's trying. He's trying to make these decisions that'll put him closer to where he needs to be.

"Hi," George ends up saying after a moment. "You're home?"

Home. Home. Home.

I'm home.

"Yeah." Dream adjusts Elytra in his arms and immediately hisses when he gets a sharp pain in his neck. He covers it up, but George sees through him. "It's late, I know, but I was driving, and it was one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions."

George looks at him. He slowly blinks into a smile as he nods to himself, eyes shifting to Elytra.

"Do you want to put her in bed?" He whispers even quieter, like he's recognizing that she is asleep. "I can make you something to eat if you'd like."

It implies they'll be talking. Oh, how Dream wants to talk. Talk and talk and touch.

"I'm not hungry, George," Dream tries to smile.

"Oh," George nods. "Well, goodnight then?"

Dream falters in his step. "No! Uh, no." He gulps and shakes his head back and forth, trying to stay quiet. He doesn't want George to misunderstand him again. "Let me put her down, I'll be right back." Then he's looking at George. Soft smile and appreciative eyes. Patient. Kind. "Do we have any hot chocolate, do you know?"

"Do you want some?" George asks, messing with the rim of his glass.

Dream finds his mouth and can't help but grin as soon as George does. He's always found it simple to hear George's smile without even looking at it, but seeing it does so much more to him. He

nods.

“Yeah, I’d love some. Please?”

The door to his bedroom is comforting to push open. And Dream lies Elytra down so simply, so softly, and bunches up her silk blanket near her like she loves. He presses a kiss to her cheek and feels cold skin to his mouth as he whispers; *I love you*, and as he thanks her for getting some good rest.

But the walk back to the kitchen is long.

He doesn’t change clothes, although he should. It’s been a long day in the ones he’s got on. A long evening spent in the car. He smells of outside, like his car and like cool blown wind that soaked through his windows for hours. He probably smells sugary from the cake they baked earlier. Surely, he smells nothing like the cologne he had put on this morning. The hours have passed now.

George is boiling water when Dream gets back.

It’s funny how different they do things.

Dream used to heat water in a mug in the microwave when he was a child, accidentally burn his fingers on it when he didn’t let it sit long enough, when he was impatient and too excited. George warms water in a pan on the stove because Dream doesn’t own a kettle. He promised him they’d go buy one soon.

“How did the party go?” George asks as he moves the pan off the burner.

The bottom of Dream’s lip curls upward as he thinks back. He nods firmly, giving the effort of a candid smile as he leans against the bar, cupping his own elbows.

“It was nice. My mom liked the cake we all made for her,” he says, recalling the fact that he hadn’t even tried it. He’d tell George if it were good, but Dream doesn’t have any taste of it in his mouth, not even the batter.

George’s eyes split into a smile. “That’s good. Happy Birthday to her.”

“Yeah,” Dream says fruitlessly.

Times like these, where soft-spoken words feel like their only source of conversation, Dream forgets the past. Moments ago he had been weary about approaching the house, or coming close to George, and now it is all that he wants.

To touch, to feel George, who is *right there* in front of him.

It’s unclear how they step into each other’s space.

Dream isn’t sure if it’s George who steps first, or if it’s him who walks around the counter, and clutches onto the edges of George’s shirt, pulling him near and against him. He’s not sure if his face is just drawn to George’s neck, the smooth crevasse where his pulse lies.

But it doesn’t matter.

George’s fingers curl up into Dream’s hair and Dream’s hands lock around George’s back, and their bodies melt into an embrace.

When George’s hands drop to Dream’s waist, Dream lifts his own to George’s head, holds it and

shifts until their cheeks press together. He stumbles, and they walk backward until Dream hits the refrigerator in a mess of steps. George trips over Dream's toes, but he settles into the clarity of Dream's chest.

And Dream holds him.

It's relaxing, and the dimness he's been feeling disappears as George's cheek moves to the bone of Dream's shoulder, rubbing back and forth like he's listening for something. Dream clutches onto his neck harder, takes a breath of licked honey and heart-grown love, and presses the top of his nose into George's hair.

"I haven't showered," George muffles into Dream's shoulder.

"Huh?" Dream asks.

"I haven't showered," he says again.

Dream rubs a hand up and down his back, picking up his shirt with the pressure of his hand. "I don't care."

"Course you don't," George replies. "What do I smell like to you?"

Dream thinks. "Would you kill me if I said, '*like home?*'"

Before him, George snickers. He snuffles against Dream's shirt and then regards him a moment before a stillness closes.

"Perhaps a little," he admits willingly, pulling back until their eyes find each other. Dream almost becomes lost.

"Then kill me a bit, George. You smell like home."

George's eyes dissolve before they file to a squint. He thumbs over the center of Dream's abdomen. *Dream thinks of kissing him.* Maybe the skies would open, or maybe the floors would fall for them, to give them some space. To let them ease for a moment and just press together in a desperate kiss.

"Maybe," George whispers, his breath fanning over Dream's neck as he stands taller and holds tighter. "I'm glad you're home, though."

Dream tips his chin down until he gets a view of George's closed eyelashes. He's so gentle like this, and Dream wants to hold on before George can slip from his grasp.

"I like it when you say that," mumbles Dream carelessly from his dry mouth.

"Say what?"

"When you call this your home," Dream whispers as he angles George's head back until it's just *eyes* and *foreheads* and *noses*. "Sounds so good when you say it."

George cracks, sports a playful grin and nearly shies away with a crimson tone of a blush on his cheeks. His finger sinks against Dream's face, a warm press into a cooler patch of skin. Dream doesn't look at him. He doesn't need to. He knows what George is doing. Dipping into the blanket of space where things feel good. When his thumb swells over Dream's face and settles onto his bottom lip, Dream grins.

It's like they're in the hotel again, just the two of them.

But they're in their kitchen, under no lights, accompanied by the weak pour of early morning moon, maybe the approaching sun. Dream doesn't want to be back in Fort Lauderdale, or even back in the hotel. He wants to be here, holding George, breathing in the relief of knowing that the space they've given each other has—or hasn't paid off.

They need to talk.

But the importance of touch exceeds it all, Dream realizes as George moves his fingers ever so delicately over Dream's face, like he's yearning for something already right in front of him, losing himself in it.

A warp of wonder illuminates the underside of Dream's belly when George's eyes flutter closed. He lets his forehead drop to Dream's chin, and he sighs, somewhere between relief and disappointment, as his hand splays over the front of Dream's abdomen.

Dream wants to be greedy, wants to kiss his forehead and deliver the words that have been lurking at the front layer of his brain. He could tell George, who seems so at ease like this, about his desire to be selfish. And maybe George would listen.

A quick stutter of George's hand on Dream's hip reels him back.

"We should talk, right?" George asks.

He asks like he's not sure either, like he has not made his mind up, like being in each other's arms is too fucking blinding to even think.

Dream nods against his head, lips brushing unapologetically over George's skin.

"Definitely."

Silence unravels between them as they pull apart, and George stretches his hands behind his back as his lips turn to a taut line. There's something natural about it, the way George sighs into his smile and raises his eyebrows like he's doubtful in his movements, nervous and a bit wobbly on tired legs.

Dream swallows, keeps his lips sealed because words seem too far right now.

The ice maker rumbles, bringing a recognizable sound into the kitchen.

And suddenly George is opening his mouth and looking at Dream with curious eyes.

"Will you come to bed with me?" He asks.

Dream has to stall for a second, because George—his best friend who he's formally been waiting to come home to, the one he's been waiting to hold, to touch, to feel against him again, has just asked him into his bed, a low lit place of intimacy.

The words aren't there, and Dream isn't sure how long they won't be there for. But he nods and takes George's hand when he's offered it, and follows him as they tiptoe toward his bedroom.

He bumps into George as soon as they enter his room, just as Dream's body lifts into a happy satisfaction of comfort.

"Shit," George whispers as he rubs the lower part of his back.

Dream blinks at him. "Sorry. What's wrong?"

"Your hot chocolate. I didn't end up making it."

"Oh," Dream retorts as he shrugs. "I don't care. I just didn't want you to think I was going to bed."

"I figured that much." George walks further into the room, turning to sit on the edge of his bed.

"You're sure?"

Dream wants to cup his face, push the pads of his thumbs into his pink cheeks. Dream wants to call him *baby*, watch him shiver as his eyes drop to a close.

"I'm sure, George."

There's a rimming of red that surrounds George's cool-washed face. His skin is so smooth tonight, and Dream thinks about the underside of his jaw, bruises and colors of pleasure he could paint. It's beyond a want by now, merely a desire, as his hands itch to get closer.

George looks back, peers upwards as Dream steps in.

His heart thumps heavily in his chest, with the slow pumping of his blood that flows like sugar in his body, too sweet and sickeningly tasteful.

"Do you want to change?" George asks.

Dream turns to his dresser and then sets his eyes on the closet.

"Actually, yeah, could I?" He clears his throat. "I don't wanna walk back in my room when Elytra's sleeping."

George swings himself up to his feet and opens his closet.

"What do you want to sleep in?" He looks to Dream.

Sleep.

Dream struggles to hide his smile.

"Um, just a shirt is fine. I'll get too hot if it's a hoodie or anything."

George nods. He tugs one off the hanger and throws it against Dream's chest. "'s that fine?"

His gaze settles on the style, a simple v-neck, oversized black shirt that he absolutely has never seen George wear.

"You've never worn this."

George chuckles from the drawers he's digging in across the room. "Yeah. I bought a bunch of new shirts before I moved."

"It doesn't smell like you," Dream mutters as he feels his stomach turn, tongue going thick. He presses it to the roof of his mouth and tries to shut himself up.

In front of him, George is bent over, and he turns to look back, hair all forward and cheeks squished from his upside down position.

“Doesn’t smell like home, Dream?” George teases with the fascination of a giggle. He shuts the drawer and then holds up some shorts and a pair of boxers. “Wasn’t aware you wanted to wear clothes that are owned and worn by me.”

Dream flushes red. *Fuck you*, he wants to frown at him.

But he squints and says nothing.

“Boxers are new, too. Shorts are not. Cool?”

Dream nods. “Cool.”

“Okay.” George turns around. He shuffles underneath the sheets, becoming small amongst the bed. His nose burrows into the pillows. With one turn of his head, he looks toward Dream. “Hurry and change. I’ll keep my eyes closed. Let me know when I can look again.”

Dream changes ridiculously fast and then slips away, telling George he wants to check on Elytra just one last time. He peeks in the bedroom, finds her fast asleep in her crib, and turns up the sound machine right inside the door at the bedside table.

When he returns, George looks much more tired, his head lolling sideways as he scrolls mindlessly on his phone.

He’s given Dream some room on the left side of the bed, and as Dream steps up and onto it, George blinks and then shifts until he’s on his back.

For a moment, Dream lets the ticking of the fan guide them into a calm.

“You okay?” Dream asks as he pulls the blanket over his shoulder.

It’s a direct tunnel into a conversation about what they need. He’s asking George if he’s okay—about it all. All the while, his knee bumps George’s while he turns on his hip, and George’s eyes open wider at the sudden motion.

George lies patiently and clicks off his phone before he faces Dream in the bed. Their kneecaps touch, and George angles them so their bones no longer have to dig into one another.

“I’m fine,” he whispers, glancing toward Dream’s eyes. “Thank you. For it all.”

“Hm.”

George hums back, a little more hoarse than before. And Dream recognizes the roughness he wears as his eyes flutter shut. He’s tired, but he’s making this effort here, in this bed.

Dream appreciates it.

“For giving me some space, that stuff,” George clarifies as his eyes open again. “Thank you,” he says as he shuffles flatter into the bed, warming up to the blankets and the pillows, cheek squishing onto one of them. “Do you think it helped you?”

A frail silence situates between them.

Dream wonders if George is asking because he needs to, or just for the sake of conversation. Because they haven’t really talked. Does George even know what Dream’s been thinking of the past few days? Does George know what drew him to want space in the first place?

Does George miss the hotel? Did he hate it?

“No,” Dream admits. “No, it didn’t.”

George closes his eyes again, like relief has spread through him, and Dream feels him blindly reaching for his hand, intertwining their fingers under the blanket like it’s a secret they cannot see.

“Can I be honest with you, Dream?”

Dream makes a sound with his mouth as he watches George’s nose twitch, his eyes flitting between open and closed. “Please.”

“Well, let me ask you this. Do you think it’s okay to be selfish sometimes?”

Fuck. “Yes.”

The sensation of George’s thumb rolling over the back of Dream’s hand is too rewarding. It continues to put a warmth in the pit of Dream’s belly, and he wants to curl his toes. The touch is simple. Tender. It’s a word, it’s a plead, an apology, all in one graze of a thumb, and Dream gets it.

“I want to be good,” George nods his head as he speaks, and Dream follows it, watches intently. “To you. To Elytra. I want to be good.”

There’s no place for hesitation.

Dream speaks. He says, “you are,” under his breath, but George is there, with a solid jaw and strained eyes.

“No,” he clears his throat. “Let me finish.”

Dream does.

“I’ve never been good with kids, Dream. And I don’t mean that in the way that’s like—*you know*—when people say they’re not good with kids, and then they don’t make an effort because they don’t like them. *I love kids*. The kids around me never got along with me. And I *hated* it,” George says.

Dream listens. He clutches onto George’s hand and brings it to his chest, so George’s fingertips can feel the beats of his heart.

“My uncle had this ex-girlfriend, and her kid—we had the worst time together, and I just have these terrible memories with kids and it made me think that it’s all me. Just *me*,” George says, sticking his tongue into his cheek. “I grew up knowing that I’d want a family. Maybe a big one, maybe just a single child I’d get to spoil the hell out of. But every kid I tried to get close to.” He shrugs hopelessly.

“I don’t know. It turned me into believing that I’d end up as this shitty dad. So, I promised myself I’d do everything in my power to be good. Wherever I could when it came to children.”

George pauses and heaves out a heavy sigh. He chuckles and lifts his eyes to the ceiling.

Don’t cry, Dream wants to tell him. *Because if you cry, I will cry*. Your heart is mine. Anything you do, I will do.

“Then you told me you had a baby, and I got this rush of compassion and fear, because I couldn’t fuck it up,” he whispers. “Then I realized it had been two years of not knowing and I felt selfish

that I was upset about not being there sooner, because I just wanted to be good to you, and good to her, but all my experiences had been so poor with kids and I was worried and then—I met her, and fucked that up, too.”

He pauses for a minute, and Dream takes the chance to give him a look of utter confusion. Of astonishment. He opens his mouth to say something.

“Stop,” Dream tells him.

George shakes his head. “No.”

“*Stop.*”

George stays quiet.

“George,” Dream whispers carefully, his hand unlatching from his knuckles so he can trace over George’s jaw. “You are so good.”

“You don’t have to do this,” George says as he keeps his eyes closed. “I’m not—I’m not telling you all this so you can. *I don’t know.* Let me know things will be fine. I just—”

“I know that. I know you by now,” Dream interrupts. “You’re being honest with me. Selfless.”

“Selfish,” George corrects.

“Selfless,” Dream corrects again. “Selfish would be you keeping this all to yourself, dickhead.”

Despite the tears threatening to unlock at the corner of his eyes, George laughs.

“Shut up.”

Dream traces over George’s cheek, drawing smooth skin with the brush of his thumb. It’s a relief to hear George’s thoughts, and maybe he’s collected them mercilessly over the past few days, or has been since he’s arrived. Perhaps it’s all been hooked on him since they locked eyes at the airport.

He doesn’t know.

But it hurts, knowing that George is laid out and vulnerable over the thought of this.

“I’m sorry,” Dream admits. “For never finding the chance to talk to you about it, for never asking you about the future, for holding back. I feel like I failed you as a friend.”

A faint, shattering breath hits the back of Dream’s hand.

“I don’t want you to apologize,” George whispers back, kissing the center of Dream’s palm. “I’m scared. You’re scared. It’s scary. The future, not knowing what’ll happen. You didn’t tell me, you didn’t tell us, or the world, but that’s okay, because I’m here now—and Sapnap’s here. And I think that’s what’s important, right?”

There’s no doubt he wishes he could change what he’s done. But there’s so little benefit in thinking that way. He knows George wouldn’t want him doing that, either.

So he tries to swallow the grief that sticks willingly to his throat, and that tries to drag him to dangerous places of guilt.

Dream stares at the tip of his nose and sighs.

“Right,” he says.

He thinks about George and children, about George and a family. The simple thought of it is almost overwhelming. George’s fears don’t match his, but it wouldn’t make sense for them to. They’re different.

Just lying here, together in this bed, their breaths are different and their touches are different, but pushed together, it’s the same exposed feeling of vulnerability. He’s grateful for George’s open, honest mouth tonight.

“Have you ever thought about raising kids with me?” Dream can’t stop himself before he asks.

George has his lips on Dream’s finger when he chuckles. “Are you kidding? Of course I have.”

Strangely enough, Dream’s blush doesn’t burn. It cools him to his feet. Flares a breeze onto his warm body.

“Really?”

George gives him a look.

“Dream, you joked about kissing me one time. How was I not supposed to think about starting a family with you from then on?” He teases, rolling toward Dream as soon as Dream’s calf hooks over him.

Their legs intertwine, and slowly, Dream lets his hand rest on George’s waist.

“Is that so?”

Dream’s relieved when George leans forward and rubs his nose over his mouth, moving back and forth until Dream has to pull back from laughter. His lips part after he keeps them stiff, and before him, George mutters in laughter.

“George,” Dream chuckles, his eyes gleaming in their low vision.

George hums. “Kiss me.”

Dream is in nothing but George’s clothes. His shirt, his boxers, his shorts. He’s surrounded by the touch George lays upon him—a sensual graze and a timid thrill of fingers on him, a nose that presses into the line of his lips, encouraging him. Dream wants to please him, tell him how much he wants to give him, give *in*.

He allows himself a sliver of thought as his mouth parts, as his lips barely touch George’s, as they both breathe slowly into each other, still yet to cave.

“George,” Dream whispers, again, because nothing else sounds right.

As he speaks, his upper lip slips between George’s mouth, and George *takes*. He pushes and pushes and Dream *pushes*, and together they become a tangled breath of a single open-mouthed kiss.

It’s surreal kissing him at home.

Dream isn’t greedy. He doesn’t pull hard to get George to touch him or get his hands on him. Instead, he guides George, links their hands together and shivers when the trace of his fingers feather against Dream’s chest.

Kissing is so strange, Dream thinks. It's gratifying, wrecks his core, and makes him want to explore unfamiliar tastes, flavors he's never come across.

Like George.

George whose mouth tastes like pleasant ruin, like peace, like home. Like apples and mint and a tongue of hope.

"George." *Again.*

He can't seem to stop calling for him.

"What do you want?" George murmurs against his mouth, shifting his lips in a pattern until he nuzzles against Dream's neck. He drags his teeth, his goddamn teeth against his neck, and Dream mewls, curls his knees up and bumps them against George's. "Dream. Dream, *Dream, Dream.*"

His hands find purchase in George's hair, and he reminds himself that they're both in George's clothes on George's bed, under George's sheets. He squeezes his hand and listens to the rough sound emitted against his neck.

Against his hip, George shifts, and sucks harder on the curve of Dream's pulse.

"Feels nice?" George whispers as his mouth moves to Dream's jaw, below his ear, toward his chin.

Dream huffs through his nose and digs his nails into the skin at George's hip, right where one of his hands lies. "You know it does," he says gruffly, bringing George further in for a proper kiss.

He kisses him even harder, kisses him with effort and meaning, pushing all their pain and trying to rid it down each other's throats. There's so much less of it in this bed. At home. Dream hangs on to the thought.

He teases George, pulling away every time George tries to move in.

"You're so frustrating," George pulls back and then throws his leg over Dream's waist, guiding them back together.

This time, it's core and hips and chest all flush, and *fuck*, Dream would be fine living the rest of his life in this bed, desperate and a little horny.

Dream swallows in the middle of a kiss, and George pulls back to give him a moment to breathe.

On top of him, George looks so much different, and Dream wonders if he's got the same wish in his body, the same thick pounds of his heart that are getting caught at his throat. Dream hums at the sight of his reddening mouth, his swollen lips wet with spit and warm to the touch.

Sliding his hands along George's hips, Dream grins.

It's an honor, lying on his back and having George on his waist like this, his back arched just slightly as he gives Dream a few seconds to breathe.

Dream puts his knees up, and George instinctively leans back against them, tugging his bottom lip into his mouth to look down at Dream.

Slipping his hand to touch against the smooth skin at George's waist, Dream nearly swears.

He looks good.

He's fucking perfect.

"Holy shit," Dream whispers. "I could fuck you like this."

His breath hitches as soon as he recognizes how real his words have shot out of him. George cocks his head to the side as he raises an eyebrow.

"You're saying you want me to ride you? Our first time? *Come on*," George playfully says back before he bends down towards Dream's face, cradling his cheeks. Their hips grind together and Dream tries not to hiss at the impact, but it's George, and Dream isn't the strongest when it comes to him. "You're so fucking beautiful, Dream, you know that?"

Dream's entire being overflows in a matter of seconds. George traces his face, kisses delicately over each of Dream's features, whispers, "lovely," again and again until Dream forces their mouths together, desiring a new kiss, touching their bodies in a tight embrace as he licks behind George's teeth, as he finds anticipation on his tongue.

"Too far," Dream mutters to him as his forearm pulls George closer. "Come here."

"I'm here," George giggles. "I'm here, baby, I am right here, not going anywhere."

There's something cruel about the way George speaks to him like *that*, the way he says *that* to Dream. Breaking his heart in a sweet voice, with a sweet word. He welds it to Dream's mouth and runs his hand over his belly, sweeps up and down his bare skin.

Dream doesn't even know when they discarded their shirts. Maybe between their giggling, their banter, or their mess of kisses, jabs to each other's chests and sides.

The room illuminates an elegant glow, and Dream ends up looking down at George, the boy and his bare chest, on his back, the mattress underneath him, looking handsome and perfect underneath the light of the bedroom.

It's much more romantic, Dream thinks, to be kissing like this, in such lighting compared to the hotel.

George draws him down by the nape of his neck when he notices Dream has gone rigid. So Dream stops thinking, and he lets his body go limp against George—and he gives in.

He kisses, loosens his muscles and sinks into George.

And later, he fucks George slowly, sweats into the crevasse of his neck, and whimpers softly against the pulse he feels on his lips. Despite the comments about George riding him, George lies on his back, and Dream keeps a shaky hand to his face so he can look into his eyes. George kisses his palm, probably tastes sweat and filth, but Dream hopes he doesn't care, not right now. They laugh, toggle between quiet gasps and annoyingly high pitched moans, and Dream irritates George by stabilizing his breath and muttering out, "can't stay quiet?"

George's nails cry into Dream's skin as he groans into his shoulder. "Oh, *oh*, you're so fucking annoying."

The crush of their foreheads hits together a little too hard, as Dream says, "look at me," and "come for me," and as he kisses George through his orgasm, and as George struggles to kiss back.

George's eyes pinch as soon as his jaw shudders back to a close, and Dream shushes him softly, kisses around his mouth and up by his eyes as George chuckles ridiculously.

“Just like that, baby, *yeah*.” Dream swipes his finger underneath George’s eye and over his closed eyelid to see his face again. And once he sees him, eyes darker and liquid-brown, Dream blushes profusely. “*Hey*.”

They’re quiet when they finish cleaning up, and Dream coats the back of George’s shoulders with soft kisses as his hands find a home on his upper thigh.

“It’s not sweaty?” George chuckles as he tips his neck backward.

Dream hums. “No, it *is*.”

George scrambles to turn. “Well! Don’t—Why are you *doing* that?!”

Dream ignores him and brings him back to his chest, holding him as his mouth presses careful whispers of transparency.

“Because.”

He inhales and exhales over his skin, and fails to think of what to say. It’s been so intimate, and now as Dream touches him, he gets this whipped feeling of harmony, knowing that George is safe and in his arms. As his chest rises and falls in front of him, Dream can listen to his breathing now that George isn’t over an ocean or far from his reach.

Without even thinking, Dream calls for him.

“What?” George asks in a tired voice, shifting his entire body around until he faces Dream.

From here, Dream is an instant light. He grins. He nearly shies away, but George raises his brows a few times like he’s trying to get Dream to speak.

“We’re okay, right?” He bleeds into the silence between them, fearing a questioning glare. But George blinks.

He laughs like Dream has asked something so obvious.

George smiles fondly. “Course we are.”

They stay quiet.

A moment passes.

George breathes steadily. His eyelashes look wet from this angle, and Dream supposes it’s a mixture of tears from squeezing his eyes too tight or rubbing at his lids. He scoots forward.

“Sleep, Dream,” he kisses him to suppress his thoughts. “You’re so tired I can hear you falling asleep.”

Dream whispers as his eyes flutter closed. “Impossible.”

His mouth barely opens as he talks, but George nuzzles to his chest and kisses between his collarbones.

“Thank you,” George whispers. “For listening to me tonight. For being here, always.”

Dream whines low. “*Georgie*.”

“What?!” He laughs low.

“Don’t—Are you going to be all gentle and genuine and—”

George presses his palm to Dream’s mouth. “Sleep.”

He sleeps.



Honestly, Dream isn’t sure why it took them all so long to agree on moving in together. Besides the constant young adult banter about how something may not be as good as it seems, this—breakfast at one in the afternoon in front of a football game, his hand carelessly intertwined with George’s under the blanket, and his mouth profusely swearing at Sapnap—this is what he’s been waiting for.

George presses his chin shyly to Dream’s shoulder and whispers at him not to swear in front of Elytra, and Dream flushes at the realization, but it’s a mild sort of scold he gives Dream, and Dream appreciates it, the squeeze at his hand and the touch of George’s mouth over his clothed shoulder.

They eat pancakes.

Dream has become a little opposed to sweet foods in the morning. And having woken up just twenty minutes ago, the cushion of pancakes and syrup against his tongue doesn’t sound appealing enough to dig into.

But he feeds Elytra and uses his thumb to wipe her mouth when she turns to him and raises her chin like she needs help. He chuckles at her and does it anyway, and Sapnap ends up giving her a napkin and turning her around to explain a better way to clean up.

“Your team is kind of shitty,” Sapnap says to Dream when Elytra trails off to the corner of the room to play.

George cackles at the sudden drop of the sweet tone, and Dream brings his face forward, glaring at Sapnap with a cocked eyebrow. “Say that again, I dare you.”

“Your team. Is shit.”

“I actually,” George says as he sits between them, “think the team is kind of good. Both of them, you know.”

Dream and Sapnap look at George. They look at each other. Then, like the world has drawn a light back to George, they laugh. George flushes red.

“I love you, George,” Sapnap chuckles.

George slaps a hand over his face. “Sapnap! Tell him the team isn’t awful.”

Looking over to make eye contact with George, Sapnap chuckles. He brightens when George pouts at him, and Dream watches the two of them interact on Dream’s behalf, like George is trying to get Sapnap to tell Dream that the team opposite of Sapnap’s favorite isn’t an enemy.

Sapnap squishes George's cheeks together with the palms of his hands. "I'm joking Georgie," then Sapnap looks to Dream and smirks and says, "where'd we be without him?"

It's a simple question, meant for all suitable answers. But it's a little much for Dream, who spent all of last night in George's arms, his nose at his nape, and, well, his dick in his ass.

"I, uh—yeah, uh, I don't know," Dream tries to laugh, but it comes out like a low scramble of a cry, and Dream nearly curses at himself for it.

Neither of them notice. They just rustle on the couch to get comfortable.

George ends up muttering, "can we watch this later," and they both cave for him and for Elytra, who becomes restless and has absolutely no interest in American Football on the living room television.

It's not long until they're all comfortable and until Elytra has cuddled close to Dream's chest to drift off to sleep.

Dream gets the urge to hum to her as his fingers trace up and down her arm.

He needs to bathe her, wash her hair and brush through it. It's much shorter now that his mother has trimmed it, but he's had to wash it more often since her hands stick to it like glue. She's not used to the length, and therefore she's wanting to touch it constantly.

"I think we should do something fun tonight," Sapnap whispers to him.

Their heads are close, so Dream cranes his neck to the side to look, to see the smile caught on his lips.

"Like what?" George asks.

Dream turns back.

"I don't know. Isn't there a Fair? Amusement Park?" Sapnap gestures to Elytra. "Clearly we don't have to do any of the bigger rides, but maybe it'd be fun. Your mom talked about that hill we could sit on and watch the sunset at."

George scoffs. "You want to watch the sunset together?"

"Kiss my ass."

"I actually love the idea," Dream admits wholeheartedly, as he brings his eyes back to George. "And you?"

It doesn't take George but a second before he's in.

Because the smile on his face has been there all morning.

He nods again. He nods again.

"I say yes."

The sunset isn't as enjoyable as they hoped it would be, but Dream still wraps his arms around Elytra's body and holds her close as he points to the colors in the view. She's enthralled by it, her eyes fixated on the clouds in the sky that cover the best part.

Oranges and yellows and light purples bloom vivaciously from beyond the cliff, and Elytra cheers, causing heads to turn and an old couple to grin.

There's hardly anyone around, and Dream is grateful for the low profile they've got tonight. To be fair, he doesn't know what he'd do if someone asked. But he doesn't care as he slips into his moment, back on the grass.

He whispers to his daughter about heading out, about grabbing dessert on their way home as they lie side by side, both of them looking up at the stars.

"Ask George if he wants some," he says to her, watching her stumble strongly his way.

He shoves his hands out to prevent her from falling, but regardless of his efforts, her knee still digs into his ribs, and he huffs. But he does a good job of pretending that there's nothing wrong, and for that, Dream smirks at him.

It's been a long evening, and despite being tired, Dream thinks he'd do it again—spend a night out with his friends, with his daughter, getting on rides made for young children and drinking sugary drinks.

George had given him little touches all night, tender and sincere and apologetic. Dream hadn't known what the last one was for, but he had seen the sad smile on George's face when they got a second to themselves. He couldn't bring himself to ask what was wrong.

If it's another dip into their fears, their mutual doubt, then Dream wants to clutch at his hand, run his thumb over George's fingers and remind him that this won't be easy. Maybe the night is just overwhelming for George. Maybe he wants to go home.

Dream thinks he should stop trying to figure out exactly what George needs. He'd tell him if something was wrong.

Sapnap pays for ice cream.

They stop somewhere on the way home, and eat in the car, sugary scents of waffle cones and cherries taking up half of their air. Music plays around them, and they sing softly to each other as Dream continues down the highway.

He has vanilla dripping down his wrist as he holds the steering wheel. His hand cramps from the awkward hold, but next to him, Sapnap offers to take the treat, and he wipes it with the poor amount of napkins they have.

"Do you have more?" Sapnap asks as he opens the glove compartment. He takes about three seconds, maybe less than that, before he cackles.

Dream glances over.

"Are these condoms?" Sapnap laughs out loud as he pulls one out.

"Well," Dream cocks his head to the side, reaching over to smack it out of his hand. "I mean.

They're old."

Then he gives a look to George in the back, who only laughs under his breath.

"You guys use one of these last night?" Sapnap says slyly, not making eye contact with either of them.

At first, Dream's breath leaves him. He laughs, a pigment of pink creeping up from the back of his neck.

"I said they're old!" Dream glances at Sapnap before lowering his voice and whispering, "asshole."

"Sapnap," George leans forward and smirks teasingly. "Mind your business."

The boy in the passenger seat shuts the glove compartment — *there aren't even any extra napkins in there* — and twists his body around. His eyes are wild, they're wide, and he's got this enormous smile on his face as he looks between Dream and George like he'd just cracked some sort of code.

"I literally knew it!" He shouts. "I didn't know. But, I kind of thought, and I was going to tease you about it, *because why wouldn't I*, and then—you just admitted to it."

Behind him, George scoffs.

"Who admitted *what*?"

"You did!"

"I said nothing! I told you to mind your business, idiot," George laughs, and Dream looks in the rear-view mirror to catch the hint of George's wink.

Sapnap is so lively tonight, and Dream wants to spit out how thankful he is for Sapnap answering his texts and how grateful he is for him telling Dream to be selfish, for telling him to come home. He wants to thank him for befriending him years ago, for never giving up on him in the rough of it all. This car, full of ice cream and bickering friends, with a tired child and other tired men, feels too good to him.

"Maybe you didn't admit it, but look at him," Sapnap points to Dream. "He's blushing."

Well.

He's definitely not wrong.

George puts two hands on the seats and leans forward to look. And Dream finds it *quite* endearing.

"You kind of gave it away, sweetheart," George mutters to him in a tone rich with dampened heat.

And just like that, the entire car goes silent.

Color coats over Dream's face and shivers down to the roots of his neck. He swallows and feels the knots at the apples of his cheeks. They hurt from how wide he beams, and his lip aches as he gnaws on it, when his skin nearly breaks from his biting.

"Well, shit George, you're about to make me blush too," Sapnap breaks the silence.

Dream turns his way.

“You wanna walk?” He threatens lightly.

Sapnap laughs.

It’s so *simple*. For George to flirt with him like this, and for Sapnap to joke about it, and for Dream to react. It’s a push in the right direction, and Dream understands how worthy he is of being able to live amongst a healthy life with good friends and a family. *His family*.

They arrive back home, and George carries a sleeping Elytra into her bed, uses a wet rag to clean her sticky hands.

He does it so gently, moves in between her fingers like they’re made of glass, fearing that he’ll break her.

Dream stands back while he does it.

He doesn’t shower, but he changes into something more comfortable, pulling his clothes from his hangers as quietly as he can while George does the same for Elytra. Dream doesn’t ask him to, but despite that, George does it. And Dream’s not sure if he feels like he *needs* to or if he *wants* to help her.

Whatever it is, it helps guide Dream into his warmth.

“Is this okay?” George whispers to him from across the room, gesturing him over with a few flicks of his fingers.

Dream’s been stalling. Pretending to look through his clothes.

He stands behind George and looks over Elytra’s crib, and he gets this wave of confidence as he stares down at his daughter.

A mumble rings out of his mouth as he stretches his arm against George’s stomach, pulling him to his stomach.

“It’s good,” he whispers against the shell of George’s ear. “I like the pajamas you picked out. They’re cute.”

He kisses his ear once. And George’s knees crumble softly.

“Do you?” George doesn’t turn. He continues to rub his fingers over the crib.

“I do.”

George reaches his hands back and tangles them up into Dream’s hair. He thumbs at the back of his neck and fidgets with the tips of hair.

“I thought, you know,” he whispers as Dream hums, “*hmm*,” right back. “I checked the radar, and it’s going to storm by morning, so maybe she’d get hot. Didn’t want to give her long sleeves because sometimes it gets too warm in here when it storms.”

Dream gives himself a moment of genuine thought. He thinks he’d marry George right now. In the darkness of this bedroom, with the presence of his daughter, with the pounding of his heart against George’s back.

“You’re incredible,” Dream whispers quickly before his throat can ache to a close.

George rocks his head, delivering a rough sigh as he turns into Dream's chest. "I actually think you are."

A smile made for both of them eats away at Dream's face. He lets it stay. He's not shy about it now that he's got George in his arms like this.

He takes George to bed, and for the second night in a row, they sleep against each other.



Dream had plans to take Elytra to his mother's.

He was going to spend the evening recording a video with a couple of friends for each of their channels. So as planned; Elytra was going to stay with his mom and maybe Drista for a couple of hours, bake and play, and maybe go for a drive to enjoy the cool air.

But then there was Sapnap, and *George*, and kind smiles on their faces as they suggested taking her back to the Fair.

"We could try again for a good sunset, give you some alone time, let you record."

And instead of the regular fear that would stir up inside of Dream's tummy—that worry and that protective breath, he felt more at ease than he ever had before. He had agreed, dressed his daughter up in about five different outfits before styling her hair in a way *she* wanted. They laughed in the mirror together until their faces turned red, took a few pictures, sent them all to his mom, to his sister.

Then he recorded, allowed his voice to get loud and his laughter to spill into his room, through the hallways of his home as he sat there alone.

And then now.

Like a sudden hit to the center of his chest, like his heart had begun to abruptly rattle up toward his throat, Dream weakens at the sound of Sapnap in his ear.

They had *plans*.

The Fair.

Record.

Come home.

Watch a movie together.

Let his friends enjoy some time with his daughter because he trusts them. *He trusts them.*

"—and everyone's okay, Clay, but—" *Clay. Clay. Clay.* Something is wrong.

Dream doesn't count to ten or find the deep breaths that wound into his lungs. It's all gone, and he feels the blows burning into his temples, back behind his ears as his body goes from one side of the room to the other. *Shoes.* Keys. Jacket.

It's raining. His mouth clenches in a hot, fearful, prickling ball of terror.

"Do you hear me?" Sapnap asks over the line, calmly and in a pattern of utter risk. He's trying to keep cool for the sake of avoiding scaring him. But it all hurts already. Dream has already flooded with shock.

Dream's eyesight blurs for a moment, and he stabilizes himself at the frame of the door.

"Answer me."

"I hear you," Dream replies flatly, getting into his car. "Why didn't the calls go through—*fucking*—do not disturb!"

A silence fills the line.

Dream has always feared this. Not being able to reach people when he needed to, and people not being able to reach him when they needed him. But this—this is so different to him. In perspective. Right in front of him. It's come over him, flushed over him in this terrifying heat.

Quietly through the phone, Dream can hear someone call, "Nick!"

And he nearly whimpers at the sound of his mother, who must hug Sapnap because their voices become muffled and Dream whispers, "come on, come on," hoping one of them will hear him, and answer his questions.

"Which—" Dream can't even ask because the words are stuck in his throat. "Which hospital, Sap?"

The roads are still wet, but Dream drives down them at an uncomfortable, too fast, speed, so selfishly. Sapnap tells him where to go, grounds him as he whispers reassuring words into his ear. He's expecting something else to go wrong while he drives, so when he hits a red light, Dream takes a breath and heaves out a groan. He cries a desperate swear word and hits his hands against his steering wheel, and then tells himself to focus on slower driving.

"Elytra is fine, Dream," Sapnap reminds him again, just like he had when he first called. "Please. Remember that. They just want to check some things, but she's *okay*. It's okay. She's not hurt. Do you hear me?"

She's not okay. Because if she were to be fine, she'd be at home, and they'd all be bunched up in his bed, and they'd all be sweating from the press of their limbs in such a small space.

But instead, she's in a hospital, and Dream didn't answer his goddamn phone.

"They just need to talk to you," Sapnap says quietly. "They won't let us talk with them. I—I don't know why. Not even your mom. They won't let your mom back. But she's fine. We see her, and she's beautiful, as always, and she's fine. Okay?"

Dream doesn't listen to him. He just asks more questions. *What happened? How'd it happen?* Sapnap gets frustrated when Dream asks him, *why?* But Dream can tell he's trying to keep it together for so many reasons. For so many people.

Because Sapnap is brave.

There was an accident with one of the rides. And with just a couple of injuries, they insisted on those involved, those nearby, coming to the hospital just around the corner to get checked out.

Sapnap, George, Elytra.

So Dream *gets* it, he really does. His friends, who had taken his daughter out, and George, who supposedly had nicked his eyebrow bone.

But Dream hates the feeling.

Especially when he arrives, and when he's shaking off his emotions and walking directly into a woman in a suit, and a man who introduces himself as hospital administration. The woman smiles and politely asks him, "Are you Elytra's father? You're Clay?"

"Yes. Is she okay?" He tries to look behind her, down the hall, to the apparent space where Sapnap and the others hadn't been allowed. "My friend said I was supposed to speak with one of you."

She smiles nervously, and Dream's stomach turns devilishly.

"Is it all right if we ask you a few questions?"

This was a minor incident.

Now he's being *questioned*.

Dream feels sick.

He follows her to where they have more privacy, right at the corner that leads to another long, eerily silent hallway.

The woman in front of him clears her throat and tries to offer a kind grin. She smells of awful soap and too much perfume. The man just stands stiffly, a little stressed and clearly uncomfortable. Dream wants his daughter. He wants to go home. He never wants to hear shoes touch the hospital floor, and he never wants to hear beeping again.

"Do you share parental rights with your child's birth mother?" She asks as she holds the tablet in her hands closer to her chest, tapping a few things.

Dream shifts on his feet.

"No. I don't," he says swiftly, looking over at the man, who flips through his own clipboard.

She nods her head. "Do you know if she listed anywhere on your paperwork for contact?"

Dream goes numb.

"She. She shouldn't be. We had trouble with some court meetings, but nothing with her. The state had trouble, but they fixed everything. Her contact shouldn't be anywhere. I have," he nearly stutters over his confidence. He doesn't know *what* exactly to say. "Elytra is *my* daughter."

The woman grins kindly. It's warm, and for the first time, Dream accepts it.

"I understand. On behalf of the state, we apologize. And on behalf of hospital administration, we also apologize, but Clay, your child's birth mother is still the first emergency contact listed on the hospital paperwork," she says carefully, keeping her eyes on his. "She was called the moment they brought your child to this hospital."

Dream stares at her.

“And she’s here.”

Chapter End Notes

please remember that this is fiction, so if there are little plot holes, or things that are not as accurate as life really would be... it is not *me* that is wrong.... we just will *pretend* hahaha.

ANYWAY. thank you for reading another chapter. i truly didn't think it would turn out to be so long, but we've just got one left. A good, happy ending, with angst to get through. Friends to see, love to trust.

thank you for nearly 28,000 hits. that is incredible to me, i really didn't expect that upon starting this fic. it has been a pleasure writing this one. I don't think I have felt this close to my writing in a really long time, so I appreciate it more than you know.

Lots of love, always.

[Reese](#)

eight

Chapter Summary

Something about stability, Dream thinks.

Chapter Notes

final chapter :)

thank you absolutely so much for 35k hits on this fic, i am truly amazed. thank you for giving this kid fic a chance. it means the world to me. <3

sorry for any errors!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A sour taste rides up Dream's tongue. It's bitter. *Unfamiliar.*

He should swallow it down, shove it to the back of his throat and disregard it.

But it's hard.

It's hard when the person who he's given thought to, who Dream has guiltily wished would come back, turns the corner and stands before him, meeting him with just a trace of an innocent grin and almost terrified eyes, clad in tennis shoes and a sweatshirt.

She looks the same, really.

Brunette hair peeks through the hat she wears, with blonde drawn throughout it, brighter near the ends. It's much, much shorter now. It used to be long. Dream remembers it long. She's got more freckles, and for just a second, Dream allows himself to wonder if Elytra's cheeks will sprout tiny freckles. Only a few scatter near her nose now, but as she gets older, maybe they'd bloom, maybe more time in the sun would do her well, if she'd like it.

"Hi," the woman in front of him smiles nervously, her eyes lacking comfort and rather drenching with fear.

Dream hates greetings. With anyone. They're too nerve-racking, too repulsing as he looks at the other person's hands and their feet, their jittery toes, and how they wiggle inside their shoes. Their mouths and how they twitch awkwardly when the wrong word has been said.

First meetings never go well.

Reunions are worse.

Unexpected reunions are hell.

“Hello,” Dream croaks with a dry throat and a splitting chest.

He reaches his hand out, and she takes it gingerly until they meet skin to skin, moist nerves into a seeping, clear failure of confidence.

“I’m so sorry they called me,” she says, *to the point*. Dream is glad because he doesn’t want to be here long. “I thought maybe something had happened to you. Wasn’t sure what—or why anything was going on. But I just,” she whispers as her hands close together, intertwining fingers to reveal how small she must feel. “I came quick, just in case.”

The sleeves of her hoodie are drenched. They’re muddy, and Dream doesn’t ask why, but he suspects it’s from the weather, when the downpour occurred.

Her hat comes off next, and she uses her wet sleeves to push her hair back. Dream watches. He blinks as he shakes his head, eyes squinting in notorious shame.

“I should have been here faster. I don’t know why you were called.” Then he watches her face change, and in an urgently hoarse whisper, he adds, “I’m sorry.”

“Mess up with the hospital paperwork, I think?” She turns to look down the hall, both of them soon stepping out of the way when a couple of doctors need to pass. “That’s what they were explaining to me.”

A whirr of a sound reflects past the tip of his tongue to confirm he understands. “I think, yeah. That’s still—I don’t get it. I got upset with them. They kept trying to apologize on behalf of the state, maybe compensation, but I told them not to bother. Fuck that, you know?”

She chuckles lightly and nods.

“No bad blood, no funny feelings.”

Dream doesn’t know how to take the reminder they had said to each other in the hospital, crushing hands and knuckles as they held each other and completed decisions. It’s funny now, Dream thinks, those feelings. Staring at her, seeing the resemblance of his daughter within tiny things, cheek fat and smile and the squinting of their eyes.

“None.” Dream shoves his hands into his pockets. “Did you see my mom?”

She nods as she takes a big breath in. “I did! Yeah. Um,” she turns and jabs her thumb in the opposite direction. “I think your friends were there, too. One of them had hurt his eye, but...” Dream stops listening, but it doesn’t matter, because he’s sure the rest is small talk.

George. She’s talking about George.

“I hadn’t known you were here—in the city, I mean,” Dream says.

“I’m not. I came to visit my dad. We happened to be near.”

A delicate moment doesn’t feel fair at a time like this, but it arrives.

“I didn’t want to go in. I just saw her from a distance, but—she’s beautiful, Clay,” she says faintly, a blink of a smile trying not to jump too high. “You’ve raised a very beautiful girl.”

He has.

He truly has.

“Thank you,” his voice coats with a thickening agent, lemon and honey. His arms cover with goosebumps as he looks at her. Her smile thins this time, but he still takes it as warm and natural, a speck of hope within an endless ocean. He feels grateful to hear such words, and he doesn’t realize it until he croaks upon clearing his throat. “Thank you. *Really*. Thanks.”

The air calms around them, minus the repulsive sounds of the beeping coming from down the hallway. Dream keeps turning toward it, tilting his head from one direction to the other, hoping to find the source. The longer he waits, the more eager he becomes. To see Elytra, to be sure his daughter is secure and in his arms, warm and far from any sort of danger, no longer scared of the unfamiliar faces around her.

Dream doesn’t like this.

“Do you know if they’ll let me back?”

She takes a breath and releases the steady grip of her own two hands. A break of tension, a rip of strings that have been stuck around her. “They should. I can show you where they led me originally.”

Dream follows.

The two of them leave muddy tracks on white tile, trudge a path of heavy and undefinable emotion down a quiet hallway toward where he supposes Elytra must be.

He’s nervous. More nervous than he thinks he’s ever been before, his knuckles pressing aggressively together as though he’s stopping himself from attempting to grip on something. But he should. Grip onto something. Maybe the loopholes of his jeans or the wadded, bunched material at the end of his shirt, the coat sleeve he could pinch with his nails until they bend.

A doctor meets them at the front glass, and Dream is quick to give his identification, sliding it across solid wood until he watches with unblinking green eyes, hopeful for a brief exchange of words.

Next to him, he hears shifting, and he’s reminded that he isn’t alone.

It’s hard to decide sometimes. What’s good, and what’s bad, what he shouldn’t do, and what is best for everyone around him.

He swallows. And this time, it’s not bitterness that guides down the path of his throat—it’s an unshakable fear at his heart, a tug on his lungs, a punch at his sternum, all telling him to *do it*.

Because it is his decision to make. He is brave enough to ask, to voice out what he means, what he wants to say, despite his thoughts on his own growth recently.

So he does. He squints his eyes accordingly and turns on his hip.

“Would you like to see her?” He asks, small and notably nervous.

The face he knows in front of him changes. It eases, guides to a more sincere sort of smile. She sighs through her nose and takes a larger breath through parted lips.

“Thank you,” she whispers, like she’s honored he has asked. “But it’s okay. I will go.”

Dream studies her for a moment.

He asks for himself. “You’re sure?”

He’ll regret it later if he doesn’t, when he’s home, feeding Elytra something sweet—he’ll regret not double checking if she wants to meet her, hold her, greet her for the first time in two years. It’s not her *place*, and maybe it’s not his to ask, but Dream knows it’ll keep him up at night, and he’ll doubt himself, and he’ll knead his cheek onto George’s shoulder in rough sobs asking if he should have done more.

George will hold him, tell him it’s okay to break like this over such thoughts.

But Dream won’t let matters get to that point. Not when he can change it before it happens.

Tired eyes blink in front of him, and a hand places over Dream’s crossed forearms.

“I’m sure,” she nods, heaving an inaudible sigh as she nods again. “You should go, though. She needs you.”

Then Dream’s bottom lip trembles. It wobbles, threatening to tighten against his teeth as he inhales a sticky breath. For a moment, his hands don’t even feel like his own. He squeezes them and almost loses himself to a reckless sob as he gently steps into a hug.

“Thank you,” Dream whispers in a soothing voice.

She pulls away and clutches her fingers to Dream’s shoulders. Her eyes shift from his face to his cheeks and then to his chest, where it is eye level for her. Then she’s closing her eyes, and Dream thinks she must be convincing herself of something.

It’s only fair for him to wish her well at this moment.

“Stay well,” he says, and when his tongue completes her name, it sounds more and more distant than the times he’s said it before.

He watches her leave through double glass doors, and he watches her sleeved fists press to her eyes like she’s hurting.

Through it all, he hurts, too. He does the same — he presses the heel of his palms against the aching that kicks behind his eyes. He paws at it, scrapes mud unknowingly onto the underside of his eye as he follows a nurse blindly through the hallways.

“Your mother was here a moment ago. Would you like for her to join you?” The man asks Dream, looks at him while he dresses himself up in pain, shows his vulnerability in the middle of vanilla walls, white flooring, navy-and-maroon-colored blocks scattered.

“You couldn’t have sent her back earlier?!” He spits as his hand flies from his face. His voice has become lower, scarier now that he sounds torn to pieces, ripped to shreds. Dream doesn’t exactly know what he is supposed to feel. He still regrets having his phone on Do Not Disturb. “Sorry. I mean—She’s my mom. My daughter would’ve been happy to see her. Wouldn’t’ve liked to be alone back there.”

The nurse is patient with his words, with his mouth and attitude. Dream would tell him, truly, if he had the time, about the entire situation, just so he could know why he’s upset. But it’s pointless.

It’s so, so pointless.

“I understand, Sir. But, she’s not on the Emergency Contact list. She can access the room with you

present,” he says with a polite smile.

Thanks, Dream would say. Instead, he closes his eyes. My mom isn’t on the list, but the woman who hasn’t seen my child in two years is, even though she has no rights signed to her.

It makes sense.

It makes no sense.

“I’ll get her soon.”

Dream scoffs when he sees Elytra.

Beautiful.

Hair messily drawn out of the pigtails he had done it in. He shakes his head playfully as he walks toward the crib. She stands instantly, shocked at his presence, and his hands reach out to hold her, to touch her skin like he’s been desperate to.

“What on earth happened to your hair?” He whispers teasingly as he lifts her, a mess of limbs kicking to his chest the moment her body crowds his.

He tries not to tear up at the relief, but this is his *child*, and relief is an honor right now. So he closes his eyes and exhales into the cool air of the private hospital room. He clears his throat, keeps them still, and then pulls back to brush over her cheek.

“Hi honey,” he murmurs.

Her exhaustion is obvious. She thumbs over Dream’s cheek and mutters, “mud,” and Dream hardly catches it before she says, “Sap,” and “Georgie,” and “owie,” through the babbling of other words.

“Are you hurting?” He numbs a little at the mention, at the thought of her being hurt. “Owie? Got hurt? Can you show me?”

But she lies her cheek onto Dream’s shoulder instead and rubs her hand down his back, shaking her head a couple times.

“No.” She’s almost too tired to speak. “*Georgie.*”

His palm cups the back of her head, and he frowns at the wall, bending down to collect her shoes on the chair. They must’ve taken them off to place her in the crib earlier.

There’s a nurse right outside the room waiting for him, probably ready to guide him toward the exit, the front desk, or somewhere to talk, but all Dream wants to do is sit with his daughter, and hold her, re-familiarize himself with her.

His fingertips are feather light over her shirt, and he brushes up and down in careful gestures as he hums.

“Yeah?” He asks. “Did George get hurt?”

Elytra has always been just as comforting as Dream, her gentle hands enough to nurse someone at peace. Tough smile and stubborn, but body weak enough to give in to touch. He loves how similar they always have been, how they always can be when it is just the two of them, embracing in something warm and protective.

She whispers sadly. “Yeah. Bump ‘s head.”

Dream is already out of the door amidst her conversation. He holds her wet coat and her shoes in a plastic bag, and keeps his eyes squinting down the hallway in search of the correct door to follow as soon as he realizes the nurse is no longer there.

“He’s okay,” Dream says, although completely unsure. Dream tells her anyway. “We’ll see him in a minute. George is okay.”

The vague sound of a sob against his shoulder startles him, and he makes the sudden decision to keep talking.

“And—and we’ll go home, yeah? You wanna?” He asks as he makes eye contact with the nurse. The woman smiles and raises her chin and instantly steps his way. Dream sighs with his whole body, eager and more eager and desperate to get home. “And your grandma is here, too. She’s waiting for us. Sapnap, too.”

Elytra is a simple shape against Dream’s chest, and he holds her nearer to him while the nurse talks.

She talks a lot about what happened, what Dream should do when he gets home, and she does it all in this very fine voice of earnestness, like she is trying to drag Dream from his place of worry and lean him down to where he needs to be. Maybe it’s her job to prevent nervous reactions and speak to him in tones of static that reverberate between his ears. Maybe he should just accept it.

After a while, he nods, forces a decorative smile and watches the nurse splay a hand over his daughter’s back.

“She’s been kind to us tonight. You’re lucky to have such a sweet girl.”

It’s just a compliment. Something parents say to other parents. Adults to other adults. Nurses to Dream, a single parent with gooey thoughts stuck to his brain about whether he deserves what he’s got.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

And then he’s gone. Faster than he even remembers getting to the hospital.



Dream eats soup in the kitchen with all the lights on, goosebumps clinging so unfavorably to his skin as the broth burns his lip. He glues his back to the chair and orders himself to think about the entire day.

It's hard not to.

And despite being alone in the kitchen, where it's much, much easier to think, Dream wishes he wasn't. He wishes it were lively in here, which is why he thinks he's got the lights all the way on, even the ones on near the pool, protruding a faint glow underneath the level of the water.

He'd swim if stepping too far away from Elytra's bedroom didn't scare him to death. She's sleeping

in there for a change, and as much as Dream would have liked to have her in his bedroom, he wanted to give her a good night full of rest. He knows he won't sleep much tonight, shaken by disruptive thoughts and angry jitters at his bones. It's unfair now, as he closes his eyes and thinks about soaking his body into the pool, disappearing past water, coming up with his hair stuck against his forehead and coming up with an eager breath for his lungs to take hold of. It's unfair how shitty the day has been.

So he eats his soup, burns his mouth a little more, and expects the low roar of his stomach every time he sighs at himself.

It's past one when he wakes against the couch to rough knuckles against his cheek.

George's touch has always been more than a charming glow upon Dream's skin, more than a low lit flame. It's something that could drag him to the depths of the earth, something that could encourage Dream to take his wings apart and walk on bare feet across hot sand until heat cleaves too hard to him, until he could feel the true effects of a burn.

But George has never approached Dream without a remedy strapped to his body.

George could break Dream with his right hand and heal him with his left. All in the same touch.

Hands cradle Dream's cheeks. *I'll let you wilt me, George.*

Glimpsing at him upon waking up is rewarding. It's relieving. Dream hasn't exactly seen him since they'd returned from the hospital. George was quick to sneak away into his bedroom, despite the little whimpers of Elytra asking for him. Dream could only promise her that he wae, again, e. Again—empty words Seeing him now is different.

George is still beautiful, still has an array of freckles at the collarbone on his left side. Dream spots it best when he wears these loose t-shirts. Albeit buying packs of new ones, he goes for the thin, old ones. *It's just something about him.* But he's scarred. There's barely a bandage over his eyebrow bone, and dried blood dresses itself around white gauze.

Dream frowns with half-closed eyes.

George beats him to the start of a conversation. "You cannot be comfortable."

He's on his knees beside the couch, Dream realizes not much later, leaning with his elbow on the armrest, cheek stretching with his fist.

From this angle, Dream can look up at him and see how crooked and silly his smile looks, how genuine his features are. He stares for a moment, looking through his tired gaze to find what he'd like to see: just the blissfulness of George's grin.

George raises his eyebrows and shows his teeth when he hums and smiles again. "Hmm?"

Dream sinks further into the couch, the back of his head now flat against the cushions.

"I'm fine," Dream whispers through a sigh before opening his eyes and lifting his hand to George's forehead. He's careful with the brush of his thumb, but he shifts around the bandage and pouts. "You're not though."

Dream watches George breathe through his nose as he bends further down. He catches Dream's knuckles with his own rough ones, and through an uneasy breath, George sculpts their fingers together.

“I am okay.”

Dream smiles tiredly.

“You seem to always be okay these days,” he tells him. “So admirable.”

A hint of honey drains down his cheeks, color floating away as he turns to be in Dream’s line of vision. He makes a sound similar to a scoff as he cups a hand over Dream’s cheek. His eyes seem to quiver, like they’re nervous, and then they close. They open again, and he allows himself to look over Dream’s face.

Then he leans forward and kisses Dream.

Faint enough to take his breath momentarily.

Dream would like to say something. Or draw him back in, loop his fingers into the waistband of George’s pajama bottoms so he can tug him onto his lap and kiss him stupidly. But he’s tired, and it’s useless when it’s this late, when his bones don’t move quick enough.

“Can I walk you to bed?” George asks with a brush over his cheekbone.

Dream is flustered. “You can—uh, I, um. Can you kiss me again?”

George doesn’t falter. “Course.”

And he does.

If he hears the thundering of Dream’s pulse when he hauls him up and when he places his fingers across Dream’s heart, he says nothing. Maybe it doesn’t bother him, maybe this is why Dream asked him if he liked storms all that time ago. For this tender moment, for George to touch him like this, for George to kiss him like this, for George to care for him like this.

George helps him into bed, keeps his hands on Dream’s hips as they slip him underneath the covers.

The bedroom is dark, and George points out how this is how he should sleep, as opposed to the bright lights of the living room. Dream snickers at him and tugs him down into the bed, burying his nose into the warmth of George’s chest, where he knows it’s safe.

“I’m so thankful you’re here, George,” Dream says on the edge of sleep, eyes already closed as he focuses on the fingers twisting through his hair. “So glad you’ve moved in.”

“Yeah?” George whispers. “You have no idea.”

“It’s amazing. ‘S like...”

George’s hand slips up Dream’s shirt to rub back and forth over the large patch of his skin, and Dream injects his own thoughts with a rasped moan.

The sound of George’s murmuring giggles is enough to draw a blush out of Dream.

“Stop. Don’t laugh at me. It feels good.”

“Feels *that* good?” George playfully jabs at him. “Do you want me to rub your back?”

Dream moans even louder this time, purposely to get the point through. George smacks him.

While taking his shirt off and lying flat on his stomach, Dream turns his cheek and finds George's slight smile. They squint at each other, and that's when Dream sees it. The simplicity of George's tired blush and his honey-soaked mouth.

"Why are you so good to me?" Dream asks him quietly.

George blinks. "Because."

Because. Just because.

Dream realizes this is where George would say, *because I love you*.

He also realizes that he is in love with George.



The hospital is much different without fear riding down Dream's back. It's not so sullen or gray when that awful taste isn't stuck to his tongue. Still strangely vague in a way that makes him want to float down until he's far underneath the tiles, but at least he's not holding his breath up in his lungs like he had been last night. At least he's not scared.

He signs some papers and fixes the emergency contact lists that Elytra has, double checking some of the insurance plans since he's gotten them renewed. He adds his mom, his dad, and George and Sapnap, just in case. The pen shakes in his hand while he writes, but he hands it back to the woman in front of him, who smiles as she tries to give him another apology on behalf of everyone in the hospital. Everyone. Staff. Administration. Sure. Dream shakes it off.

The smell of lemon creeps into the soles of his feet, yellow in his throat and stuck in his nose unfaithfully as he sits in his car.

He reeks of the hospital. A reminder of a poor memory.

It's past three in the afternoon when he drives home, and three-fifteen when his mother calls, curious to know about how he's doing. Dream is honest with her. He tells her about his sleep and how Elytra is. She asks about George, and while Dream stalls, she catches on to his hesitation and drops it. Her next question revolves around the unexpected visitor, but at Dream's silence again, she drops it.

"Just let me know if you're not okay, okay?" She asks softly, her voice gentle through the phone.

Dream nods as his foot pushes onto the accelerator. "Okay."

At home, Sapnap has all the lights off.

He's got the blankets taped over the doors in the living room to cover up more of the afternoon sunshine.

A movie plays on the television.

"Holy shit, Sap," Dream whispers as he spots him on the couch, drowning in the darkness of a usually bright room.

His shorts ride up on his thighs and the light of his phone paints across his face, giving him a simple glow. To his right, and flat on the couch, Elytra looks completely and utterly passed out. Dream snorts at the sight of her. In front of them, the movie still plays loud.

“This is,” Dream says lightly as he walks toward the blankets that are already falling. “Sapnap, this is going to ruin the paint. Idiot.”

He says it carelessly, with no ill intent behind his voice, but he’s kind of upset about the thought of this tape against the walls.

Over on the couch, Sapnap shrugs.

“It was that or pushpins,” he says, tossing the blanket from his shoulders. “I figured you wouldn’t want holes in your wall. Right?”

Dream glares. “Of course not.”

Something changes in Sapnap’s face, and Dream realizes it must be his own voice, his own mouthful of bitterness, squeezing through his taut lips as he groans. Sapnap is lucky he gets it, he’s lucky he has the energy to take Dream’s frustrated face and make it his own humor to laugh at. He’s lucky Dream likes him. Because if it were anyone else, Dream would have thrown up his middle finger, maybe cursed them out for trying to peel paint from the walls of their home.

But it’s just Sapnap.

His best friend, who goes through just as much as he does, who went through the trouble of setting up a fort of pillows and blankets in the living room, just so Elytra could have a dark space to watch a movie in.

Sapnap, Dream thinks. The man who cares from the roots of his body and not from the surface of his skin.

“When’d she fall asleep?” He asks quietly, not even realizing he was interrupting Sapnap. “Oh—sorry. What?”

Sapnap shakes his head as he yawns, to excuse Dream. “It’s fine. I was just sayin’ that we made some lunch earlier, if you want some.”

Dream turns his head toward the kitchen and nods.

He can’t resist bending down toward Elytra, though. Sapnap reaches out to smack his arm.

“Don’t wake her!”

Dream frowns.

“She’s sleepy,” Sapnap whispers as he stoops forward and tucks the blanket closer to her chin. “You’re going to wake her the second you get near her.”

“Do you even know how hard it is to not pick her up every time I look at her?” Dream groans.

Glaring through him, Sapnap laughs. “Try.”

Dream rolls his eyes and tells Sapnap to *enjoy the damn movie* and instead goes to eat bites of whatever lunch has been left in the kitchen. He does it quietly for a while, letting peach mango juice stain his lips as he scrolls through Twitter, the sound of the movie loud in the background.

The day still feels vacant to him. Still sort of out of reach.

He's been thinking of Elytra's first few months, and how loneliness haunted him, but how her safety was the only thing that kept him safe, how streaming felt like too much of a chore to complete.

There are tweets dated to bad times.

Dream @Dream

no streams this month. kind of needing a break. hope everyone understands<3

Replies had come in instant, fresh and courteous words of encouragement, giving Dream a pat on the back for his efforts lately, wishing him well, promising him that everything he is doing is okay for himself. Which—*he knows*. He knew, but he hated it so much, between telling George and Sapnap and Karl and Quackity and Bad and so many others. He just needed a bit of time to himself.

Time to differentiate between life and love and family and friendship and understanding that a father and a streamer and a friend is all the same guy wearing the same shirt, with the same hair that greases up, and the same tongue that swears a little too much. He was still him.

He recalls early memories, and he thinks about how things could have gone.

Would Sapnap have come to Florida sooner?

Would he have managed a long road trip through puddles of wet asphalt just to ease Dream's weak body and the tired knots of his brain?

Dream doesn't want to think that they'd feel sorry for him, that they'd *take it easy* on him, or play his game with lighter fingers, but he can't help but wonder if their days would still be this full of uneasiness with phlegm all locked up in their chests.

Behind him, Sapnap closes his hands tightly around Dream's neck. He pretends to break it as he makes a cracking sound. Dream shuts his eyes when Sapnap rests his chin atop of his head.

"You good?" Sapnap asks gingerly.

Dream tilts his chin up and grins at him through a haze of warmth.

"I feel like a man in love, Sapnap." Dream admits firmly.

A thumb presses into Dream's cheek, digging into his nerve. Dream doesn't swat him away. He just melts back into Sapnap's chest and his waist with a whimpering sigh.

"Not going to lie to you, man, I think you are." Sapnap levels the creasing line between Dream's forehead and stares at him with a hint of a genuine smile. It looks defeated when Dream widens his eyes to take a better look, but it's just honest. Sapnap has taken his skin off to show his veracity.

"You look like you're in love."

Dream guides himself into a wondrous hum as his eyes flutter shut.

"Yeah?" He asks, exchanging shy grins with his friend. "How so?"

"You've got the eyes that say it. Nice and quiet. Always curious for him. Thoughtful. You've been wearing warmer clothes lately, and I think it's because you want to be ready to hold him. That kind of stuff, you know?" Sapnap looks away after he speaks.

The color on Dream's cheeks darken, turning him to a bleeding fruit.

It's so funny how Sapnap can look at him and see these things, while all Dream can do is think of them.

He's been writing the book as Sapnap reads it.

"Yeah," Dream whispers carefully. "I think I have been."

"It's good on you, though," Sapnap tells him, "makes you look all clean and formal and warm and —*good*. Bright, or something."

Dream smirks. "Or something?"

"You look cute."

"Thank you, Sap."

A silence stretches between them, and Dream eats away at it. He doesn't welcome these pauses between them that make him feel uncomfortable. He's *growing*, like stems and blooming flowers. Rain is in his home now, rather than just outside, and he's *growing* and learning and understanding how to be comfortable with more people, with his friends, and it feels extraordinary for this garden to *grow* in his home.

He wants more of it.

More unharmed growth.

"You know he's blaming himself."

Dream swivels in his chair until he can turn his brows into a frown, until he can almost look through Sapnap.

"George is?" He asks, and waits for the nod he knows is coming. When he gets it, Dream locks his eyes shut.

Sapnap sticks his hands into his pockets. "He was fine this morning, but he left a little into the movie we were watching. We didn't talk much about it, but I can just—I can tell, you know? It's *George*."

It is.

It's George.

Dream's head bobs up and down as he replays the previous night. George in his bed, the look on his face as he sealed the two of their mouths in a fine line, as he covered Dream's cheeks and his forehead and then his shoulders in the promise of a kiss. The boy who he assumed was okay, who he had said, "you seem to always be okay these days," to.

Maybe it hurt him a little, when Dream had said it.

"I'll talk to him." Dream stands from the chair and grips his arm onto Sapnap's shoulder. "Will you come get me if Elytra wakes?"

Sapnap grins, teeth and everything, a bit of a burning, red-kissed blush on his cheeks too.

“Course,” he says. “We’ll just be watching movies, though. Come join us when you’re done talking?”

He uses a bit of inflection in his voice when he says the last word. And Dream squints at him to be playful. He’s funny, Dream thinks.

The walk to George’s bedroom is a lot longer than it should be. Under his feet, the wood is rougher, and his legs drag like he’s got anchors attached to them, weighing him down. It’s not nerves that hold him weary, but anticipation.

He knocks.

George calls from inside, his voice tangled in a breath as it sits behind the door. Dream waits with locked knees, clearing his throat and clutching his own chest, swaying a little as his lip slips back and forth between the sharpest tooth in his mouth.

The flooring in George’s room is much softer than the hallway. As is the air. It’s all easier on his eyes, much simpler, a lighter pressure hitting against his chest.

“Hi,” Dream whispers as he shuts the door behind him.

George has his headset on, and he’s looking at cars on the internet.

“Looking at buying a Ferrari?” Dream teases as he steps behind him, hands dropping to George’s shoulders.

It’s a touch that is common. A feeling he knows for himself. It’ll take a spread of his hand to get to the edge of George’s shoulders. And then he’ll squeeze. Because he knows these shoulders. He’s traced this boy enough to draw an entire map over him without even looking.

“You never know,” George giggles as his shoulders tighten and raise.

Fingers sink into muscle, right between George’s neck and his shoulder, and Dream whispers, “relax,” at George’s ear as he waits for the muscle to do the same.

George drops his shoulders and sighs, and Dream presses even further into his skin, feeling the muscle that twitches underneath his warmed fingertips. He croons at the satisfaction of George’s body relaxing, his muscles loosening under a single touch.

“How do you know how to do that?” George looks up at him.

Dream thinks of making a joke, but he knows there’s more to this. There’s a conversation to come, questions to ask, things to bring up. So he pushes his thumbs up George’s nape and then massages underneath his ears.

“I went to physical therapy for a bit.”

“Oh,” George hums, letting go of his mouse to reach back for Dream’s hands.

It always is good, when George touches him. It roughs him up, makes his heart grow four times as big, pulls his skin tighter against his bones, helps him breathe easier. This is what’s made him fall in love with George. How simple and bigger he feels from touch alone.

Dream sighs when George’s hands graze up his forearms.

A cooler breeze over his already cold skin. It’s like ice in the house, and he wants to stick his nose

into the pillows.

“Can I sit?” Dream asks, not knowing where he is going.

He never really knows. He wants to just go and go and follow whatever pulls him in which direction.

“Sit where?” George asks.

Dream looks at the bed. He looks back to the chair George is sitting in.

It’s at the same time that the idea crosses both of their minds.

“Get up—”

“—No!”

“George!” Dream pouts at him. “George. George, wait. Come on. We can. Hold on. Get up.”

Spluttering over his laughter, George holds his hands up in confusion. “What’d I just say?”

Dream stands to the side, holding his fingers together, interlaced with his nails forming crescents against thin skin. A frown is easy to play on his mouth, but he strums it harder, giving George his best pout. “I just wanted you to sit on my lap.”

George blinks.

“Well, when you put it like *that*.” George’s smirk is half-written into that of a shy grin, and Dream wants to touch his mouth to it. “I thought you just wanted to take my seat, you little asshole.”

Something about his mouth causes Dream to chuckle under his breath and to himself. It’s more of something Dream would say, and hearing it from George makes Dream’s tummy go pink and purple, sticky and sweet, honey and gold.

George reaches for him, places his hesitant fingers on Dream’s hip while he looks up into Dream’s eyes. And as Dream looks down, he can see that through the wet eyes and the hot wax of brown behind his lids, there are angry thoughts in George’s head, and Dream wants to burn them away, melt them down even further.

“Come on then,” George stands as he spins Dream on his hips, sitting him down in the chair. He parts his legs, the dark grey of soft sweatpants tightening around his thighs the moment he sits. “Come on, come on, come on.”

Dream loves when he does this. Gets a little lost in words. Repeats himself to fill silence like he’s painting walls with thick paint. Painting Dream’s cheeks with warm hands, painting his mouth with warm lips, painting the ground with warm feet. He loves how real he can get, with the lines between his fingers, how the grip will tighten at certain joints, how his hips will flex around Dream’s body and how Dream will touch to soothe.

His skin is new.

And maybe he replaces it each time he touches Dream, each time he lays a hand under Dream’s jaw, and each time their chests press together in lackadaisical praise.

Dream likes new. Likes buying new things, treating them well, taking good care of them.

It's the same with George, he thinks. Especially when his hands tend to feel this fresh and make him feel so *different*.

"You like this?" Dream smooths his thumb at the center of George's belly, and as he breathes in, he's able to touch the surface of his flesh, his own palm rising and falling along with the inhales and the exhales from George.

He whispers close to George's nose, breath fluttering over his skin like a blanket.

The both of them look closer, foreheads closing in to one another as they stare at George's stomach, as Dream stretches his shirt more than it already has been stretched. He won't care. The damn thing has been through hell already.

Together they watch Dream touch his skin, and George blushes easily, a clean strike of rose over his smooth skin as he bumps his nose with Dream, all trying to catch his eyes again.

He's quieter this time when he looks up.

"I do," he whispers, blinking fast enough to make Dream wonder. He grips Dream's neck, stretching his thumb up his carotid. "It's nice. You're warm."

Good.

This is what Dream hoped for. What Sapnap told him. He's been wearing warm clothes lately, so he can be ready to hold him.

So, he holds him, pulls him a little tight to his chest, sucks on the exposed skin of George's neck with a hand still wedged between their chests.

"Turn around," Dream tells him. "Let's play something together."

George follows. His shirt falls back to its original position, and he turns until his back smooths over Dream's chest. The skin on his neck is still a little wet, but they both leave it. George scoots far back, and Dream timidly reaches around his front as he pushes them toward the desk.

The position is a little awkward, but George curls himself between Dream's spread legs, and then hikes his heel up on the desk. His socks are bright orange. Dream gets another Merch idea.

"Open Minecraft," Dream bends down to George's level and whispers at the top of his head. His voice is half-muffled in the mess of George's hair, pressed from his headset. Dream sticks his hand in and ruffles it up.

"Yeah?" George tilts to the right to see him. "How come?"

"Uh," Dream shrugs. "Because I said."

"Oh." George makes a face of realization. "Right. 'cause you said. My bad, I forgot."

The silly smile on Dream's face is enough to make George giggle.

"Just playing," George pinches Dream's chin. "I'm just kidding."

Dream glares. "Little asshole."

George cocks an eyebrow up at him, licks his lips and glances only for a moment at Dream's mouth.

“Right.”

Their voices are quiet in George’s bedroom, the silence haunting them as the sun dips further and further behind the trees and the clouds just outside the window.

Dream controls the keyboard. George controls the mouse.

Together, they fall into a ravine after Dream tries jumping a block and while George looks the wrong way. Laughter floats in their space and the sound of George is too kind for this chair.

Dream kisses the top of his head.

“Talk to me,” he whispers as they respawn.

When George spins the mouse, he stiffens, clearly startled at Dream’s sudden discussion. He follows it up with a sigh, and releases his shaky arm, too stretched for too long, and sinks back into Dream’s embrace. Against him, George feels much heavier, like he’s allowing himself to soak into his bones a bit. It’s good. It’s really good.

George touches the fabric of Dream’s shirt, collides the side of his head with Dream’s chest.

“I feel guilty,” George says slowly, admitting with a breath that seems too hard to push out. Dream says nothing and only touches down his shoulder. His eyes round with tiresome grief, and Dream watches as he whispers, “just feel responsible.”

“Why, baby?” Dream keeps his mouth on the top of George’s head as he asks.

Sealing them together like this makes him feel like he’s closer to George, like he can hear him better, his voice a softer song inside his head. His words are even now that they’re touching, now that Dream’s arms encircle George’s waist, now that their thighs are close and now that their hearts make friends together.

Their limbs are heavy over each other’s. But it’s much more real like this.

He sighs. “Because you asked me to take care of her, and we ended up in a hospital. I told you not to call Ely’s mother when you were contemplating it, and the hospital did it *for you*. Just... responsible.”

Dream drags his hand up George’s chest until it flattens over his heart. It thumps in steady beats, bare skin to bare skin.

“Do you also blame Sapnap?” Dream asks gently, lifting George’s hand to place over his. George follows his lead.

“Of course I don’t,” he murmurs.

“Then your blaming is empty. If you blame yourself, then you must blame Sapnap. He was there. And then you must blame me, because I agreed on letting you go.” Dream feels George tightens his fingers over his own hand, clutching on like he wants him to *stop*. So Dream hears him, listens to him like he knows him this well, and he *stops*.

“Why would you say that?” George asks, grunting faintly, frustration simmering underneath the knot in his throat.

When Dream takes the tip of George’s ear between his teeth, George loosens all of his muscles and

lets go of that weight in his bones. He clicks his tongue and sticks his hand up his shirt to find Dream's fingers, lacing them together like he's a new, sudden-growing weed in the garden.

"Because it's kind of true," Dream shrugs.

A delicate sigh.

"You know," Dream adds, although still unsure if he should take his steps forward. "Elytra was so worried about you. I went in there, expecting her to be excited to see me, and all she was talking about was—" Dream kisses his temple, near his torn eyebrow. "*Georgie*." A kiss. "Georgie." A kiss. "Georgie."

A stutter of air echoes out of his nose, and he clutches hard onto Dream's hand.

"She's okay. Cared more about your eyebrow than she did about anything else. She's kind of strong, you know," he whispers. "Like me, right?"

George coughs to clear the threat in his throat. When he looks at Dream, he finds eyes that gleam back at him. A palm cups against Dream's face. This time it carries much more heat than Dream knows. "Like you. Yeah. Just like you."

Dream tilts his head up and stretches.

"And as far as her mom—yeah, George," he laughs a little. "It was weird. Fucking weird. But it happened. And it went fine. She told me I was raising a beautiful girl. She and I have no bad feelings. Just."

He shrugs.

He doesn't really know what to say next. He fades for a moment, thinks back to how he felt, how strange it was, but how *real* it was. To be there, to be appreciated for what he's gone through. To watch her come and then go—again. Kindly, like she's done before. Painfully.

"A kid," George says slowly. "You just had a kid."

Blinking carefully, Dream sighs. *Yeah*.

"I did."

"And it's been hard. But good. Yeah?" George soothes him, running tired fingers over the hair on Dream's arms. "So good. You've been so good."

The way George can make Dream's skin scrape off his bones. It's unbelievable how good he makes him feel. Safe and placid.

"George," Dream says as he closes his eyes.

"Yeah?"

"I appreciate every moment with you, you know?" He asks, Minecraft completely being forgotten in the background as they hold each other tight. "The times I find you in the kitchen past three in the morning, or when I get to hold you like this. Taking you to the beach, eating fuckin' ribs with you. That all feels so rich to me. But watching you interact with Elytra, with *my daughter*, it's a feeling I cannot describe. Not at all. Makes me kind of want to love on you a lot more than I already do."

Even if there's nothing more to say, Dream sees the eager tension underneath George's chest. There's more George *wants* to say, technically, tears he could shed, maybe insults he might commit to. Dream isn't too sure, but George rubs his hand over Dream's knee and eases him, nudges him with his forehead and his nose until they're kissing, until they're melting at the same temperature and putting themselves back together again. Dream's mouth falls open, and George's fingers are easily glued to the back of Dream's neck.

They heat up, skin dampening only after a few moments of wet mouths against each other. Crooked moans like whispered breaths in hollowness, desperate and kind—and it's only fair to call it akin to lust.

It's hot, but Dream has always thought George was hot.

He is in love with George.

"You're so good, my love. Never blame yourself." Dream tears his mouth away from George, hovering over his pulse, getting vibrations and screams against his pink and damp lips. He pulls away because if he kisses George any longer, he'll fuck him in this chair, and it'll break. It'll break and George will be grumpy that they didn't move to the bed, and then they'll play the blame game again—this time with more attitude and sarcasm and an overwhelming abundance of kissing. Again.

George sits with both legs hanging off the chair again, his front to Dream's front, hands cradling Dream's face.

It's that break-heal power. Dream lets him have it.

"You let me be good."

"I know," Dream tells him, allowing his honesty to become transparent, and then he laughs. "I'm so in love with you, George."

The chair shifts slightly because of George's nervous knee. Or maybe Dream's nervous knee. It's one of their nervous knees, or both. In front of him, George blinks once, twice, three times until his lips twitch into that of a smile, fingers itching to deepen into Dream's skin.

It starts with his thumbs. Both of his thumbs perch underneath Dream's candid and luminous eyes, sweating from staying open too long. It starts *there*, George caresses at tired skin underneath, where it proves Dream's lack of sleep. Then it's the pads of his fingers that are locked behind his jaw that George presses into, like he's squeezing against Dream's face—trying to see if the words are real or not.

"Love is just *that*. Me finding you in all those places. Me getting to see you like this, with *Elytra*. Me getting to understand parts of you I hadn't been able to understand before. I feel like a man in love, George," Dream breathes so helplessly as he watches George dip closer toward him. "And I'm not asking you to start a family with me. But I'm also not holding that back from you."

George takes his hands and rakes his fingers through Dream's hair.

He bumps their noses together.

Dream loves when he does that.

"I loved Elytra the moment I saw her," George tells him, delivering his honest words like they've been held behind a wall of so much pain. "And she's part of you, so how could I not?"

There's a four second pause.

One second. George's fingers push against Dream's skin.

Two seconds. His thumb under Dream's eye.

Three seconds. Another bump of their noses.

At four seconds, a wavering breath exhales from between George's lips.

"How could I not," he says, "because I love *you*."

The chair turns to stone where they sit. And Dream wishes it would rather become a grassy hill covered in flowers, and raining with sunshine. But he sits on a block of stone with George, wanting to tear at his chest because he loves him.

And this is hard.

It's not so easy to love, but it's easy to hold, and to touch George. It's easy to give him the simple glimmer of his own eye that he bleeds into George, and it's easy to kiss the corner of George's mouth that turns low after George speaks.

He arches toward Dream, and Dream holds him tighter, feeling that rush of dark reds and faint oranges and baby-light yellows down the center of his chest as soon as their hearts link, as soon as the patterns familiarize themselves with each other.

"Tell me that again," Dream asks him because he wants to feel giddy and crack the stone underneath them. "Please. I just—I just need to hear you say that again."

George doesn't hesitate. "I love you, D," he whispers as he drops his hands and crushes his cheek to Dream's, letting his mouth meet the shell of his ear. "Thank you."

Dream is breathless. "For what?"

"For loving me back."



It's hot for ten in the morning. There's a lot of direct sun in their backyard, flecks of it hidden by a couple of scattered trees, but most of it sears the concrete around the pool, which burns their toes as they step near the water.

Dream tells everyone to wear shoes, he's always told them to wear shoes outside. Especially when it's as hot as today is, when the red on their cheeks will blotch from sunburns and not from a blush.

A smile fastens across Dream's mouth as he stands. Elytra tries to wiggle from his grasp, her covered feet stretching toward the ground in anticipation.

He holds her for one last second before he calls out to Sapnap, whose head arises from the water, eyes drifting around until he settles on Dream.

Dream's toes press into the tile at the door frame, and he hesitantly watches as Sapnap's chin rests

on the ledge of the pool.

“Come here, ladybug,” he holds his wet arms out, and Elytra—dressed in a bright red swimsuit—stands at Dream’s feet. Her bucket hat is lopsided by now, and Dream encourages her with a gentle touch to her shoulders.

A touch lands on his own shoulders, but Dream doesn’t look away from Elytra until Sapnap has both hands on her.

Then he relaxes.

His palms press to his hips and he takes a hard breath, holding it between his lungs and his nerves, letting it all rattle somewhere within him. He doesn’t release it until George places his steady hand over Dream’s chest and whispers, “you ready?”

“No.”

George’s chin rests against Dream’s body, and his hand smooths over his heart as though he’s easing it, simplifying all the angry voices and grumpy faces his heart is pulling right about now.

“No,” Dream says again as he watches Elytra’s hat fall off. He should’ve tightened it a bit more. “But I am. You know?”

“I know.”

He probably doesn’t know. But Dream appreciates his sounds of agreement.

Dream stalls for a minute, grimacing at the floor as George tangles their fingers together. He makes an effort by standing in front of Dream, by getting him to look at him. “They’ll take it well. You know they will. You want this, just think about what you want.”

He’s right. Dream knows he is, but the thought isn’t as pleasant as he’s making it sound.

“What if I just... don’t,” Dream can’t look at George. It’s too hard. “Like, I could just avoid it, probably.”

It’s said with an airy, low, boisterous laugh. Dream doesn’t mean any harm. But then, louder than anything he’s ever heard before, George scoffs. He does it quietly, but it’s the realization, the meaning, the softness of it that is so loud.

He’s already done this before—avoided it. Been too scared to tell people about Elytra. About his child, his life, the things he’s held back for so long. He’s done it to George, to Sapnap.

“Sorry,” Dream croaks out. “I didn’t mean that.”

Because he doesn’t.

George nods against his shoulder, body heat spreading across Dream’s skin. “I know. We try to get out of the things we’re nervous about. I get it.”

“Yeah but. That was a little fucked up for me to say.”

“Shut up,” George urges, like hearing Dream say it is too defeating and too tiring and too heartbreaking. So, he takes a breath with him, decorates his ear with the little phrase of, “you want this. Right?”

Awkwardly, but so confidently, Dream twists his hands and fastens them around George. “I do. *I so do.*”

It’s the smile on George’s face and the low breath of relief that calms Dream. He doesn’t need to tell George about how he practically stayed up all night, pondering on ideas of how to word this—what he’s going to say when his back sweats against his chair and when they pick up. George doesn’t need that weight on his body, doesn’t need that stress down his throat.

“Karl is a fool for kids. And Quackity,” George hums. “You know he’s going to support you. I don’t know if he likes kids, but it’s not really about that. It’s about how much he admires you. In character, and in everything you do. He respects you. It’ll go well.”

Ahead of them, Sapnap sits Elytra up on the ledge, and Dream nearly calls out to him, telling him to put water down so her legs don’t get too hot, but he’s already two steps ahead. Dream eases, and he looks back to George, regards him for a few seconds. Three long ones, blinking and blinking to take in the genuine look on his face.

“Thank you,” Dream says, unwinding his body from George. “Thank you.”

“Always.”

Dream steps away from the back door, away from George, feeling the sensation of stinging up his back. He and George give each other a nod of approval as Dream leads himself to his bedroom.

“Just shoot me a text?” George leans his hand against the glass door, resting his cheek against his own skin. “When you’re ready to have me bring her in.”

Dream smiles.

It’s all he can give.

George’s thumb is up in the air, and he’s got a grin sewn from ear to ear. “You’ve got this.”

He’s prickling with an unsettling amount of nerves, but this is the moment that Dream’s been waiting for.

It’s something he wants so *badly*. To talk about the things he’s kept underneath him, the things he’s held in the palms of his hands for so long. He wants to tell Karl and tell Quackity, and listen to rusting laughter spilling over their columns of trust and love and honesty. He wants to hold nothing back, wants to appear honest and real.

As he sips his water and as he feels it drip down the back of his throat, he can’t help but wish it had all gone differently from the start.

This could’ve been him two years ago. Telling his friends that he was expecting a baby, that he was unsure about names. Maybe they would have laughed a little about the name Elytra, repeated it over days, in different sentences, trying it out.

He’s already had this discussion with George over breakfast this morning.

“Things wouldn’t be the same,” George had told him with milk dripping from the corner of his mouth. *“That’s just—I don’t know. I think that’s just how life works. I’m not saying everything happens for a reason, but, you can’t wish things were different.”*

And Dream, who had reached over and stuck his clean thumb into the side of George’s mouth to

clean it, shrugged. *“I feel like you’ve said those words before. That you wished things were different.”*

“I probably have. I’ve wished things were different. But if they actually were, then we wouldn’t be sharing the same milk on your stupid hand.”

Dream smacked a smile onto his face and had caved; he agreed.

“Dream,” Quackity enters the call with a giggle, something sweet to give the line. Dream appreciates it at the first sound. “How are you, man?”

Karl is there, at a distance away, and he mutters about getting a blanket, something about his room being a little too cold today.

It’s hot in Florida, though, so all Dream can do is chuckle.

Maybe it’s just Karl’s bedroom.

“I’m okay!” Dream forces a smile from his chest and sighs into his palms as he relaxes against his seat.

“Good, good,” Karl says, lingering with a yawn as he comes closer. “You’ve got a video idea? Or something?”

The way he talks is so kind, and Dream knows Karl would get along with Elytra so well. He’d smile at her, be so careful like Sapnap is, soft touches and a constant, “oops” flying around whenever Elytra bounces from one thing to the other.

“Uh, no. No.” Dream pauses. “I—There’s something I want to talk to you both about.”

A pause.

“Okay,” Karl mutters. “Anything.”

“Anything, yeah. You know that,” Quackity adds.

Karl, so kind and always there for when Dream needs someone to grip on, and Quackity, a strong, protective soul Dream knows will always be ready to catch him. Two people that have explicitly expressed how much Dream means to them.

“Thank you,” Dream croaks before clutching his frail fingers across the spread of his throat. “This is kind of hard. Like, really hard. But I keep thinking of asking you two to come visit, and I want it to feel good. Like, so good. You guys, Sap, and George. And uh, there’s just something I kept from them for—for a long time, and I have spent so long regretting it. And I just don’t want to do that with you guys for any longer.”

They say nothing. Noises buzz through the headset, a light hum. Dream takes it as encouragement to continue.

“I don’t want to say I fucked up, because George would probably elbow me, but it wasn’t a good thing that I did—trying to keep this to myself, when I could’ve had support from all of you this entire time,” Dream emits a sound, a harder exhale in order to keep himself from tearing up. “But, I have a daughter. And she’s two. Well, she’s almost three, but, uh. I—She—It’s been rough, and I apologize, for not coming to talk to you about this, when you two are my friends. I apologize. And I’m sorry for not expressing what I should have, for holding—”

“Dream, *Dream*,” Quackity interrupts with an apology. “Hold on.”

And Dream freezes. He holds his breath.

“Yeah?”

There’s rustling over the call, and Dream assumes Quackity must shift in his seat. Karl still says nothing.

“First of all,” he clears his throat. “*Congratulations*. On the baby. That’s pretty incredible.”

Laughter eases up into Dream’s mouth, and he chokes on its effort to get out of him. It’s all hot and sweet under his tongue, and he spits it out with a breath of relief.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.” Karl’s tone melts Dream even further. “Wow. Congrats. You’ve been a dad for over two years? How is it?”

Dream laughs even more now, like he’s unsure of where all the rougher words are.

“Hard,” he says through a whimper. “Amazing. Fun. Difficult. Hard. An experience. It’s, uh, it’s an experience. I love her with my entire heart. She makes me feel whole.”

“I think you might get me to cry right now,” Karl says softly. “What the hell.”

“I can’t stop picturing you as a dad,” Quackity chuckles. “Do you, like, have those little baby spoons in your house?”

Dream smiles. He pulls out his phone to text George.

Now, he writes.

George sends back a selfie of him in the water. **give me five mins :) im swimming**

Dream wants to kiss him. **Cute**, he texts back.

“I do, yeah,” he tells Quackity.

“And did you baby proof your house?” Karl asks.

“What about bedtime? Do you make her go to bed at a certain time?”

Dream furrows his eyebrows at the question, his face warming up. “She’s two, Quackity. Not eleven.”

“Are you protective?”

“Ask Sapnap. I got upset with him because he made her breakfast one morning. I woke up and couldn’t find her.”

The two of them chuckle.

“You just sound like a young dad, unsure of things, taking on daily life with a baby,” Karl says with a giggle. “I’m proud of you.”

Dream swoons.

He sits in a cloud of silence, all misty and quiet at his desk, as he appreciates their words. Even if they cannot see his smile, he lets it be heard that he's got one attached to his mouth. And then he continues. He tells them about Elytra, her birth mother. He tells them about just a few days ago when they had met again, and how Dream had been taken on an absolute whirl of a ride. He tells them about his bad days and his good days, about the timeless space between them. And then he tells them about George. Their lack of noise is almost deafening.

It's an incredulous amount of giggles. More praise.

Dream's smile upturns on his face, because he tells them that *George isn't exactly his boyfriend, but he's really, really in love with him and he can't stop kissing him and thinking about him with Elytra ruins him to all ends.*

They laugh and talk about how they want to come to Florida, and Dream wastes no time in searching for flights.

A knock at the door comes just moments later.

"Oh," Dream mutters, craning his neck to the side. "Do you guys want to meet her? I told George to bring her in. I can turn on my camera."

Squinting in a particular nervousness, Dream waits.

He's restless, but it's just his eagerness and his uncertainty that are catching up to him.

"We'd love to."

Dream practically deflates at the words, his jaw slackening and his smile becoming more genuine.

The rest of the call passes like a blur, a memory that settles faintly into the back of Dream's head. It feels all warm in his belly, right across the middle as he introduces Elytra to his friends and as he sits back to listen to the conversation advance from light jokes to deep talks and long stories.

George sits next to Dream, and their hands stay locked together as they scoot closer and closer. Elytra messes with George's hair, knots her tiny fingers into it, and yanks relentlessly until Dream has to scold her and distract her with some things on his desk.

"Listen, pal," Quackity says as he comes closer to the camera. "Be nice to George."

He grins playfully, and George mimics it, bringing Elytra to his chest, urging her to rest against his shoulder. She curls a fist against the place over his heart and rubs back and forth in the same way she does with Dream when she's sleepy. Everyone admires her, silently watching the two of them interact, but everyone also knows that Dream's got the biggest eyes on them.

"Baby," Dream whispers as he bends down to kiss her head. "You tired?"

"No, I'm okay," George bends his neck back to tease.

Dream wraps a blanket around them both, bringing Elytra her own, before he's pinching the top part of George's ear between two blunt nails. "Not you, idiot!"

They stay this way for a while, and Dream listens to the louder voices go soft regarding the sleeping child in the room. He supposes the sun and all the swimming must have made her this

way.

There's a pin of worry inside him, and he almost asks George if he should take her from him, if he should go put her in her crib so they can talk without worrying about being too loud, but it's the smiles and the honey-sweet voices that convince him to change his mind.

It's good.

Like this, it's good.

Sapnap joins them moments later, and Dream thinks that it's all just *really good*.



Night closes in faster than Dream predicts, the sun draining from the sky, leaving the ends of a sunset hanging near the clouds for just a few moments. It fades quickly, and it leaves Dream in the dark, reminiscing about how warm his day had really been.

He puts Elytra to bed by nine, and by ten, he's replying to fans on Twitter.

By eleven, he's eating leftovers in the kitchen—cold steak, cut up into small pieces. He can't be bothered to heat it up.

The back door is slightly ajar, and Dream holds a piece of sneak between his teeth as he steps toward it, tip-toeing on curious feet as he peeks around the drawn curtains.

Next to the ledge of the pool sits George, shoulders slouched in lazy posture as he draws swirls with his fingers. The light is on, and the water projects a glow into the backyard, as though the sun were still there.

Dream thinks he looks beautiful sitting alone. But he smiles sadly as he opens the door and as he walks toward him.

Above them, the stars cry, spreading an entire field of light. It may be dark out, but there's so much light.

In the stars, in the pool, in the smile George gives Dream as he notices his approaching body.

"You're still up?" Dream asks as he pulls up a chair. He doesn't really feel like getting his feet wet right now.

George's head tilts to the side. He shrugs. "Yeah. I'm not too tired yet. Didn't want to get in bed or anything."

Dream hums to acknowledge him.

Below him, George shifts. He pulls his leg from the pool and then lets it rest on the ledge. Water drips and drips and drips from his skin and Dream watches as George's face lights up. He latches onto Dream's shin, icy fingers onto a clothed leg.

"Will you swim with me?" George asks.

Suddenly, Dream feels like getting his feet wet.

“Of course. Let me change.” He pushes the chair back, already leaning away from George to head inside, but George grips harder onto his leg. “What?”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t?”

“Don’t.” George releases his grip on Dream’s leg and then sits back on his palms. “Just. Get in like this.”

“With my jeans? And my thick shirt?” Dream mutters like he’s already answering his own question.

Looking down at George like this makes him laugh, because he can see the annoyed grin all twisted and upside-down on his face. George rolls his eyes, and he gives Dream a raised eyebrow. An obvious look. A confident look.

“Take them off,” he huffs, standing to his feet until he’s eye level with Dream.

“We are not swimming naked with Sapnap a few feet away.”

George spins in a circle and reaches for Dream to steady himself. Something about stability, Dream thinks. Then he groans and frowns, a lazy, half-pleased smile as he laughs under his breath.

“You’re no fun!” He says. “He’s asleep! And that’s not what I meant, anyway. Just like this. Watch me.”

Watch you. *I can watch you, George.*

Dream thinks he could burn his veins if he paid any more attention to them, the way they’re all hot and the way his chest is near vibrating as his eyes scan from George’s hands to the way he lifts his shirt over his head.

He takes his time undressing himself, and Dream doesn’t take his eyes off of George. Not even for a second, not even when the airplanes over their home are loud enough to want to distract him. It’s easy to want to lose himself in George’s gaze, the deepening pit of brown, and the secrecy of love grinding within them.

Before he knows it, George is wrapping his thin arms around his waist and his wide-eyes are blinking at Dream.

“Your turn,” he smirks. “If you still want to swim.”

Dream parts his lips, only now realizing that they’re a bit spit-slick from how much he’s been licking at them.

“Uh, fuck yeah. Yeah, absolutely.”

And then he’s down to his boxers, and they’re stepping into the water together, hand-in-hand, chests full of air as they bubble in the same fragile laughter.

It’s a lot warmer now that their bodies are closer, now that Dream’s hand loops around to the small of George’s back, crawling up his spine until it rests at the wet tips of his hair.

Their moment of time in the water could last forever if Dream asked the clocks to stop. He could whisper softly, or beg on his knees, or just hope that with George, everything will slow, and then slow even further.

George tells Dream how proud he is of him, that he got through the day—that he went through an entire conversation with their friends. Dream’s fingers grip harder onto George, and he tells him how thankful he is that George was there, is here. Now.

They stay quiet, shiver a few times when the wind blows droplets of water and stretches them past the dips in their collarbones.

Anxiety edges over Dream, flops into the water, and sinks.

He watches it.

George brings their foreheads together at the sudden relaxation that passes Dream’s face.

“Can I tell you something?” George whispers as his nails scratch up Dream’s forearms.

It raises goosebumps, along with the low breath he sends between them. There’s such little room between their faces, and Dream would think they were dancing in this water, hands all eager on each other’s bodies, skin close and touch relaxed, yet firm.

Dream hums, so George tightens that eager grip, and he smiles.

“I want to have more kids with you one day.”

The words hang in the air, float on a thread, echo around him. Dream hardly knows if he’s heard him right, definitely doesn’t know how to interpret what he’s hearing. George has told him plenty about his desires as a father, his wishes to be good to children, his wants and his plans and his hopes. But this sounds so intimate out of his mouth.

“I know that…” George kind of backtracks, “Elytra is one child, and I don’t even know if you’d want more, but, I’d like to adopt a son one day. She could have a brother. You know?”

Dream doesn’t want to interrupt him. He can’t. Not when there’s a storm caught in his throat. Not when George is whispering this—this confession in front of him. Dream might want to say something about how, *one kid is already a lot*. But he loves Elytra. He’d love for her to have a brother. Or a sister. Another sibling.

“In the future,” George continues as he knots his fingers through Dream’s hair. “You know?”

He keeps saying: *you know*, like he’s hoping Dream won’t disagree. But how could he ever?

Anything you do, I will do.

“I will marry you,” Dream says as his arms sculpt around George’s body.

George laughs weakly in response to Dream’s sudden words. The color on his cheeks is hard to make out in the dark, but the glow of the pool makes it so pretty.

Dream lifts his hand to trace his fingers over George’s reddening cheekbones.

“Is that your way of proposing to me?” George asks, replacing his smile with a playfully shocked expression. “If it’s a promise, then those usually come with a ring, you know.”

You know.

I know, George.

Dream separates himself from George's body, slipping away from the warmth and drowning in a shiver as he goes to the water's edge. He grabs a rock, rounded and dented, sharp on one edge.

"Here." He asks George to close his eyes a little too late, but George still does it, anyway. His lids flutter shut, and his teeth come out as he smiles, and Dream gets to watch his shy smile grow and then grow again as his palm hovers over the water. "Let me try this again," he says as he lets the rock drop into the soft skin of George's palm. "George. I will marry you one day."

"You will," George whispers as he opens his eyes again, inspecting the rock between nervous fingertips. "And you wanna know what I think?"

"Yes," Dream sighs as he pulls him back against his body. "I do. Tell me. Tell me what you're thinking."

George takes a moment.

He sighs through his nose and attempts to clutch onto a familiar part of Dream, where his shirt usually is, but there's just skin. So instead, his palm goes flat, and he places the rock over Dream's heart, and it sits between his palm and Dream's chest.

Dream watches. He never wants to stop watching him.

"I think there's no one I've been more proud of in my life. And it's an honor, Dream, it's *such* an honor to be in love with you. And to know you're in love with me, too."

He's kissed George plenty by now.

But this is different.

George loves touching Dream. Touching his fingers to his cheeks and his chin, kissing down the trail of his ear to his jaw, lighting him in cold flames, covering him in scarlet warmth and thickened blues.

But this time, Dream barely touches their mouths together, licks a single line of praise and hopelessness between George's lips, scraping on the edge of his teeth as he does so. George crumbles underneath him, and Dream can never get enough of the way he shatters like this, turning into dust as his eyes squint so hard.

He kisses him lightly, lips too taut for George to enjoy it. But it's the point he's trying to get across.

With shivering hands and a rock pressed to Dream's chest, George's nails start to scratch. And Dream *loves it*. He chuckles, and he knows. God, he knows George and what he wants, but that's the point. A life without teasing George is so pointless.

"You're the most annoying man I've ever met," George says as he turns his cheek, letting Dream's lips hit his skin. Dream has no issue. He kisses from cheek to jaw, all his sharp lines and the thickened skin underneath, by his chin. "Oh, come on. *Please.*"

Dream chuckles. "We're not."

We're not having sex in this pool, is what he means to say, but George gets it.

“That’s not even what I was suggesting!” George defends himself. Then he frowns, and he guides Dream’s mouth back to his. “Just kiss me properly!”

And then Dream does. With a hand tightly on George’s cheek, and fingers curled at his hip, Dream kisses him lazily.

Like George wants.

Because he is so, so weak for him.

It takes George about thirty seconds before he’s patting Dream across the chest and calling it off for the both of them, claiming that any longer would have them both whimpering a little too loud into each other’s mouths.

They shove each other all the way to Dream’s bedroom, dripping on the floor and failing to keep their laughter held behind their chattering teeth.

Dream shivers as his legs drip onto the floor, and George is groaning at him, already digging through the drawers in order to find them both warm clothes. While he does, Dream busies himself in the bathroom to grab some towels.

They’re so cold when they touch again, despite being covered in sweaters and sweatpants and fuzzy socks, and Dream wishes they were a little less clothed, just so he could feel George’s skin press to his again. He likes it that way.

Blankets rise to their chins, and Dream looks at George silently, letting breathless huffs pant out of his mouth as he reaches for his hands, and as he sticks his fingers up along George’s navel.

“I should check on Elytra once more,” Dream says to George as soon as his eyes grow heavy. “Before we fall asleep.”

George scoots closer, and Dream doesn’t complain when George’s knee knocks against his. Cuddling is so difficult sometimes. His shoulders ache, his hands go numb, their knees are constantly bumping. But the benefits are endless, and he relishes in the feeling of having George this close, feeling his skin burn within this proximity.

“Would you, uh, would it be okay if I checked in on her?” George asks him, spreading Dream’s fingers far enough to slot his own between.

Dream blinks. “You want to?”

George sits up a little and looks down at the hair that covers Dream’s forehead, still damp and stuck against his skin.

“Absolutely.”

“Then, of course,” Dream nods nervously, a sheepish smile already wide over his mouth. “Yeah. George, yes.”

Then George is standing, and he’s looking over at the bed with his fingers pointed at Dream. One of his fists is closed, but he still attempts to point.

“Don’t move,” he says, nodding as he steals a blanket from the bed. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

Dream isn't sure how long he lies there, rubbing his fingers over his belly, thinking about George and about Elytra, and about the family he's growing here. He thinks about Sapnap, and his parents, and his friends. As he waits, his breathing deepens, and he turns onto his side, staring patiently at the door, waiting for it to open and reveal the one person who outshines the thoughts he has circulating in his head.

His eyes close.

And then they open.

George presses his weight into the bed, and Dream takes a relieving breath.

“You took a while,” he whispers, his bleary eyes blinking at the water cups in his hands. “What took you so long?”

He doesn't mean to sound overwhelmed, but he's not sure if he had fallen asleep for one minute, or five, or ten. So, he asks. He sits up and takes the water cup and presses it to his lips.

“I know you like to make sure everything in the house is okay, so I double checked the locks,” he says as he watches Dream take a sip. “We left the pool light on, so I turned that off. And I wiped down the water we dripped in the hallway so no one slips in the morning.”

Dream drops his head to George's shoulder, his smile easing into his skin. “I love you.”

Against his head, he feels George's fingers deepening against the roots, pressing against his scalp as he runs them back and forth. “I know.” Then he leans forward and gets into Dream's space and whispers, “I love *you*.”

“And Elytra?” Dream asks. “How was she?”

George takes the water from Dream's hands and sets it on the bedside table.

“Sleeping so comfortably,” he nods. “Like a little angel.”

Dream sinks back into the bed, tugging George down with him. He doesn't seem as tired as Dream, but Dream wants him close. He wants him everywhere near him right now.

It's easy for George to see it too, Dream imagines, because he pulls himself nearer, nosing into Dream's neck as soon as their legs intertwine.

“You know, she's going to grow up so beautiful. She looks a lot like you when she sleeps,” George whispers and trails a finger along Dream's jaw. He touches Dream's nose. “Right here.”

“Yeah?”

George hums. “Yeah. And here,” George touches the edges of Dream's smile. “She's going to grow up to be smart, too.”

Dream sort of snickers at that one, tilting his face more toward George as he blinks at him.

“I don't doubt it,” he whispers. “She's going to have you around.”

“Oh, is she?” George whispers back. Delicate, positive.

Dream shrugs this time, finding George's eyes through the clearing space between them. "If you want."

He says it kindly, through that confidence he knows has been sprouting inside of him for so long.

"Well, I've got my rock, haven't I?" George presses it between their interlaced palms.

Dream sighs lovingly. "*You've got your rock.*"

Chapter End Notes

aaaaand we wrap this one up!! *i may end up writing one shots of their future if anyone would be interested :)*

first of all, i have to give a huge thank you to everyone who is here, who has made it through all eight chapters, who has waited patiently for all of my updates. i did write this kind of fast, but it's been hard, i will admit. i went through a lot of rough feelings halfway through the fic, and through each chapter, but i would be absolutely nowhere if it weren't for every single comment and kudos left by every single one of you.

so i thank you, an amount that i can't even think about right now. thank you thank you. For all of the support.

i hope you really did enjoy the little journey between dream and his internal growth and i hope you were happy to see him fall in love with his family and with george, and everything in between. plot holes happen, im just doing this for fun, but let that happen, let your questions and your curiosity exist in the little cinnamon and swirl world. let them hold on to your questions. or ask!! i can answer what i can for you, if you're curious about anything :)

take care of yourselves always, and stay well!! <3

[reese](#)

End Notes

Thank you for reading!! Please leave kudos and a comment if you'd like to :) & feel free to follow me on [twitter](#)

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